

**The Pursuit of a Meaningful Life in Old Age: A Hong Kong Study**

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**of the Requirements for the Degree of**

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**Abstract of thesis entitled:**

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**Submitted by LEE Shirley**

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This research seeks to understand how older people find meanings and life satisfaction after they have retired and their children have left home, using Hong Kong as an example. In Hong Kong, many people reaching the age of sixty-five, or sixty in some cases, are forced to retire and the former are labeled as “senior citizens” in a legal sense. In a society which stresses economic growth and development, these senior citizens who are not economically productive have lost one of their most important roles in society. Furthermore, Confucian values which teach us about filial piety seem to be losing importance in Hong Kong and many people no longer live with and take care of their parents after they get married. Therefore, as these senior citizens lose their roles as productive members of society and as nurturers of their children, how can they create a meaningful and fulfilling life in the remaining twenty or thirty years of their life?

To investigate this topic, I have interviewed and observed old people who engaged themselves in various activities and spent much of their time in various places. These old people do not necessarily represent the typical ones in Hong Kong. However, by using diverse fieldsites, I have attempted to investigate various types of old people in Hong Kong. This project will help us understand what old people think and need in order to gain senses of life meaning and happiness when the populations in most industrial countries are aging, and also how we can prepare for our later life.



這項研究以香港為例，旨在了解老年人於退休以及子女成長離家後如何尋找生活的意義和滿足感。在香港，許多年滿六十五歲，或在某些情況下年滿六十歲的人，會被強迫退休，而前者於法律上會被標籤為「長者」。在這個著重經濟增長及發展的社會，這些沒有勞動生產的長者已喪失了他們在社會上其中一個非常重要的角色。此外，教導我們重視孝道的儒家思想，在香港似乎已逐漸失去重要性，很多人於婚後已不再跟雙親同住及照顧他們。這些失去作為社會勞動者及子女養育者這兩個角色的長者，如何在餘下的二十甚至三十年中創造出有意義及充實的生活呢？

為進行這項研究，我曾訪問及觀察過許多參予各種活動及流連於不同地方的老人。這些老人或許並不能代表典型的香港老人，然而，我希望能夠透過利用不同的研究場所去了解各種不同類型的香港老人。當大部份工業國家的人口逐漸老化時，這項研究將會有助於我們了解老年人如何獲得人生的意義和滿足感，並且幫助我們了解如何準備我們將來及晚年的生活。



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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

This is a study of the pursuit of a meaningful life in old age. Some animals fulfil their mission of reproduction and die thereafter. Human beings perhaps also have the “mission” to reproduce and bring up their children through earning a living. However, we do not die right after this “mission” has been accomplished. We retire, and our children leave home, but our life continues. As medicine advances, our lives have been prolonged more than ever. Most of us still have to live for a few more decades after our most important social goals or missions in life have been achieved. Yet, we cannot live aimlessly for decades, which is a fundamental reason why I discuss the pursuit of a meaningful life in old age.

In this chapter, I will first discuss the significance of this research in a capitalist and industrial society like Hong Kong. I will then write about the literature written by anthropologists and other scholars on the study of aging and the meanings of life in old age. Next, I will discuss the fieldsites and methodology of my research, followed by the structure of the thesis and personal significance of the research.

### Significance

In capitalist societies today, retired people who do not work and produce are devalued. Increasing emphasis on technology also causes many old people to lag behind what is going on in society. In Japan, for example, terms like *sodai gomi* (meaning “oversize garbage”) and *nure ochiba* (meaning “wet fallen leaves that stick fast however much the wife may try to sweep them away”) are sometimes used to describe old men who have retired from the company (Mathews 1996: 15). Cantonese terms like *lóuhmúhngdúng* (老懵懂) – describing someone who is old,



silly and ignorant – and *kèihying* (耄英) and *amouh* (阿耄) – originally respectful terms which have become derogatory nowadays – have become rather rude terms used to describe old people. How are old people going to live their later lives in societies where respect for the elderly declines?

To many people, work and family are the most important elements in their lives. Most people spend decades in their life working – striving for a better living standard, for their children's education and living expenses, for a sense of achievement, or just for the sake of earning money. Berman writes,

It seems likely that for many people during most of adult life, the answers to the existential questions are arrived at by submitting to...societally given norms in the domains of work and family. That is, answers to questions like "What is the purpose of living?" are implicitly articulated in the ready-to-hand activities of making a living and nurturing a family. Regardless of however else we may characterize them, work and family are meaning-making domains.

...Retirement resembles other life disruptions that lead to the termination of rewards for adherence to traditional practices and thereby result in the surfacing of questions about the meaning and purpose of living (1994: 139-140).

When old people retire and their children leave home to form their own families, their most important elements and sources of meanings in life seem to have disappeared, and their roles of raising children and producing economically in society come to an end. How do they find new meanings and satisfaction in society then? Do other important elements come in or do they just find themselves useless in society? Looking at the old people and us, it seems clear that some old people attend computer classes and other courses and feel young and energetic, while others just stay at home and do nothing, as if they are waiting for the end of their lives. What can old people do to sustain and regain meanings in old age? Do they tend to be satisfied with their later lives? Do they tend to feel happier working and raising children than life after retirement when they have time to do whatever they want?



These are some of the problems that I have attempted to look at within the context of Hong Kong culture.

Confucian values stress filial piety. However, people in Hong Kong are also increasingly influenced by “Western values”, making people more and more individualistic and society more youth-oriented. What do these changes in values mean to old people? These changes do not necessarily make them less happy than before, but do imply that many old people can no longer find meanings through their children, and have to look elsewhere instead. At the same time, a large number of old people are forced to live alone or in old people’s homes, and the suicide rate among old people remains one of the highest in the world (APIAS 2001a). Moreover, compulsory pension schemes were not available in Hong Kong in the past, causing many old people to become the poorest in society who have to rely on society to feed them. This results in a further decline in status of old people financially, as well as socially and psychologically. Will Hong Kong become like Singapore, China and Japan, such that laws have to be implemented to make sure that people do not abandon their parents<sup>1</sup>?

As people live longer than before but are usually forced to retire at the age of sixty-five or earlier, there is still a considerable gap between retirement and death for most people – a gap of decades. This is a process that most of us are going to face in our lives.

People of different cultures face problems in old age differently. In this research, I attempted to look at how old people find meanings within the context of

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<sup>1</sup> Martin (1988: 110) writes, “China’s Marriage Law of 1980 states that parents who cannot care for themselves have a right to demand their children’s support. Japanese law stipulates that lineal relatives by blood are obligated to support each other. Even in Singapore, where a 1982 survey indicated that 84 percent of senior citizens received financial support from family members, it has been recommended that such a law be passed”.

Hong Kong culture, as an example of a Chinese capitalist society where traditional values still exist to some extent, but where modern capitalism also predominates.

## **Literature review**

Anthropologists began paying attention to the study of aging two or three decades ago. However, they seem to have started on this topic relatively late. Amoss and Harrell (1981: 1) suggest that there is “a massive neglect of old age by the discipline of anthropology” after the “pioneering work” and “lonely monument” of Leo Simmons (1945) in the 1940’s. Foner (1984a: 195) has also stated that “the study of age is a neglected area in anthropology”. As we study such areas as gender and ethnicity, there is no reason why we should neglect this important criterion of age, which also constitutes part of our identity and defines our role in society. Moreover, most anthropological research, especially earlier work, has only concentrated on the study of aging in non-industrial societies, neglecting contemporary societies.

Leo Simmons (1945) studied the role of the aged in a “primitive society” in the 1940’s, whereas Margaret Clark (1967) and Clark and Anderson (1967) started developing theories of aging in the 1960’s. Clark suggests that “in our society we ask above all that the elderly not make waves. We assign them roles that represent a limited range of stereotypes – serene, detached, disengaged, wise, and so on – all closely related to maintaining a manageable problem population, easily institutionalized and patronized” (as quoted by Myerhoff 1984: 311). In the early 1970’s, Cowgill and Holmes (1972) suggested the modernization model, which claims that modernization worsens the social status and power of old people. However, have things like technological advancement created “ignorant old people”



and decreased social respect for them? To what extent does modernization affect cultural values in society? Foner (1984a; 1984b) argues against the modernization model, suggesting that old people's prestige in different cultures actually increases in some cases with the coming of modernization.

It was not until the beginning of the 1980's that anthropologists started to develop theories about aging in order to fill the gap due to the lack of literature on aging (Kertzer and Keith 1984; Fry, et al. 1980; Rubinstein, ed. 1990; and Spencer 1990). For example, Foner (1984a: 212) writes about the question of age norms, suggesting that "[m]embers of each age stratum are expected to fill certain roles and to act in a manner that is appropriate to their age and age-related roles", and age norms may shift as a society undergoes changes. Cohen (1984: 246) also points out that "[e]very society must cope with the fact that persons and roles age at different rates". These ideas are useful for us in understanding the social roles and identities of old people.

Apart from the development of theory, there was also an increase in cross-cultural comparisons and ethnographic data in the study of old age since the late 1970's (Myerhoff 1979; Fry, et al. 1980; Amoss and Harrell 1981; Kaufman 1986; Spencer 1990; Keith, et al. 1994; Pickard 1995; and Mathews 1996). For instance, Myerhoff (1979) did research on the old Jewish people in an urban ghetto. Harrell (1981: 193-210) wrote about what it means to be old and how people grow old in rural Taiwan. Kaufman (1986) studied the sources of meanings in life among old people in California. Mathews (1996) compared what makes life worth living among Japanese and American old people as part of his research.

Scholars from other fields studied aging decades earlier than anthropologists did. Some of their works and theories are useful for us in understanding the roles



and life meanings of old people in society. According to Lemon, Bengton and Peterson (1972), “activity theory asserts that it is desirable for the elderly to maintain as many middle-age activities as possible, and to substitute new roles for those that are lost as a result of retirement and widowhood” (as quoted by Law 1997). Rose (1965) developed the subculture theory suggesting that “old people will interact more frequently with other old people and less with the young as they grow old, thus forming an aged culture with distinctive ideas, beliefs, values and behaviors” (as quoted by Law 1997). This is useful for us in understanding the activities of old people and how they may be able to find life meanings within their own “subculture”.

Scholars have also written about roles, life meanings and identity in old age (Fontana 1977; Gubrium 1976; Baumeister (1991); Cockerham 1997 [1991]; Neugarten 1996; and Ryff and Marshall 1999). Fontana (1977: 17) criticizes past theories of the aged that “either present a large body of ethnographic data and invoke heuristic value for their studies or present theoretical speculations unsupported by any data”. Therefore, she was trying to work on both in her book by investigating the lives of old people through their daily lives. Baumeister (1991) discusses life meanings and issues such as identity, religion, death, and changes of meanings in life. Cockerham (1997 [1991]) writes about health, identity, gender, retirement, death and other aspects regarding aging, and discusses the issue of aging worldwide. In *The Self and Society in Aging Processes* (Ryff and Marshall 1999), scholars discuss issues concerning self and identity as people age – Atchley (1999: 95-96) suggests the continuity of the self in old age using his continuity theory, which states that “despite widespread changes in health, functioning, and social circumstances, a large proportion of older adults showed considerable consistency over time in their patterns of thinking, activity profiles, and social relationships”, while Whitbourne



(1999) suggests that old people construct and reconstruct their identities throughout life using the identity model.

Having discussed what have been written on the study of aging in anthropology and other fields, let me now discuss what has been written about Hong Kong on this topic. Ikels (1980) compares aging in China and Hong Kong, and concludes that “[a]ging in contemporary Hong Kong is fraught with insecurity – a situation likely to persist for quite some time” (1980: 100). Keith, et al. (1994) compare the aging experience among people in Botswana, Ireland, United States and Hong Kong. The fieldwork in Hong Kong was done in the early 1980’s. It seems that these ethnographic data are a bit dated, and may not be entirely applicable anymore. Society and its values change through time, especially in terms of affluence in Hong Kong. Many old people do not have to rely on their children financially nowadays, and they can engage in self-fulfilling activities like learning to use the computer.

Recent research about aging in Hong Kong concentrates mostly on social welfare (Chu 1996), housing problems (Lo 1998; Chan and Lee 1999), and community care and health care (Liu and Wong 1997). Other research involves surveys to measure the life satisfaction of old people (Yeung 1987), social attitudes towards the elderly (Tam 1996), and so on; while other research studies the mental and physical health of the old people (Chi and Boey 1994; Pang and Leung 1997; Lam 1997). Most of these are short reports with surveys and statistics to measure whatever standards they want to look at. We do not know how much these numbers can reflect the real situations of old people in Hong Kong. It also seems that not much has been written about life meanings and social roles of old people in Hong



Kong, and there has not been any recent ethnographic research on aging in Hong Kong after Ikels' (1980).

As we have seen, anthropologists and scholars from other fields like sociology, gerontology, psychology, medicine, and social work have written about aging and developed theories in this area, however, not much has been written about how old people pursue life meanings in old age, and not much has been written based on what the objects of study think as in many other anthropological studies, apart from Myerhoff (1979), Kaufman (1986), and Mathews' (1996) work. Therefore, in my research, I am going to approach the question by listening to old people's own voices, instead of developing theories on what they might feel and need in society. I believe that we can better understand old people through participant-observation and in-depth interviews, especially when we have not reached old age yet.

### **Fieldsite specification – Hong Kong as a place for research**

Hong Kong is an industrial, capitalist and postcolonial society where people are often commented on as being “money-minded” and politically indifferent. Being a society mostly of ethnic Chinese, Confucian values such as filial piety or respect for the old are still emphasized as traditional cultural values. On the other hand, as a British postcolonial society, “Western values” also have strong influences on Hong Kong people and people here seem to have become more individualistic than in the past. Taking care of the old parents no longer appears to be an obligation for children.

As the world emphasizes development and technological advancement more and more, Hong Kong – an important financial center in Asia – has to keep up with the pace. Though not necessarily contradictory, increasing emphases on progress



and technology may imply that old people's wisdom is less treasured than before. What society needs most now are young, energetic, educated and creative people, it is said. Being unable to take part in society's progress and technological advancement and to produce and make monetary contributions, old people seem nothing but dependants or even burdens on society. Secondary school text books continue to include what Confucius had said long ago, as if to remind teenagers about filial piety and many other Confucian values, which many students find difficult to understand but have to memorize by heart for public examinations anyway. Furthermore, Senior Citizens Day<sup>2</sup> was established ten years ago, as if people never pay attention to old people in the rest of the year.

In fact, many old people have been placed into old people's homes in Hong Kong. One apparent reason may be that the size of apartments in Hong Kong is small on average. A couple having a house of three thousand square feet, as in the case among many American families, for example, probably thinks that an old person does not occupy much space in their house and causes much inconvenience, although most people do not tend to live with their parents in America. They can even have totally different lives with the old person living with them without seeing or taking care of him or her all the time. What about a three-hundred-square-foot apartment that many people have in Hong Kong? Many of these people will probably feel that having an old person at home causes disruptions to their lives.

Of course, living in a small apartment is not an excuse. A few of my aged relatives live in relatively large apartments alone, with several unoccupied rooms in

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<sup>2</sup> "In order to promote care and respects for the elderly, The Hong Kong Council of Social Service had initiated to organize the first Festival for the Elderly in 1979. In 1993, this deliberate effort of the Council to further advocate the well-being of senior citizens had gained the recognition and blessing from the government with the marking of the third Sunday of November each year (i.e. The original date of the Festival for the Elderly) as the 'Senior Citizens Day'. This is also the befitting expression



which their children who have already moved out used to live in. In the past, many people lived with their parents even though their apartments were small. Instead, it may have to do with the changing concept of “family” nowadays – which today in Hong Kong consists only of a married couple and their children, if any. People usually form their own “families” when they get married, with their parents being excluded. “Family” implies a nuclear family most of the time. Not only are many married children no longer living with their parents, but some of them do not even support their parents financially<sup>3</sup>, causing problems to the quality of life and a loss of status and respect among many old people in Hong Kong. There is a popular Cantonese saying, “*lóuhdauh yéuhng jái, jái yéuhng jái*” (老豆養仔, 仔養仔), grieving at the process whereby the father brings up his son but then the son brings up and supports his own son, ignoring his father. This is also commonly used in a financial sense, implying that when the children grow up and form their own families, they need to support their own children, but they will not support and take care of their parents. Many parents nowadays have less expectation of rewards from their children, even though many of them think that their children should in fact support them.

Other than changes in cultural values, government policies, the aging population and elderly problems are things that have to be considered. In terms of government policies, many people would agree that the financial assistance to old people is insufficient, while money is being allocated to areas like education, housing, and even projects like Hong Kong Disneyland. Old people’s benefits are always being de-emphasized. Little has been done to maintain and reinforce values

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of the community's recognition of the contribution made by our senior citizens” (The Hong Kong Council of Social Service 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Research conducted by the Democratic Party in 2001 found out that forty-seven percent of elderly respondents are not financially supported by their children (Hong Kong daily News 2001c).



for the respect to old people, except things like Senior Citizens Day, reminding school children, in particular, to respect their grandparents and other old people on a particular day every year. In terms of the aging population, statistics indicate that the proportion of people aged sixty-five or above will increase from 11% in 1999 to 13% in 2016, and to 20% in 2029 which will be about the same proportion of people aged under twenty at that time (HKSAR 2000; APIAS 2001c). In terms of elderly problems, a comparison of elderly suicide rate among old people aged sixty or above between seven regions three years ago shows that in Hong Kong 28% of suicides were elderly, followed by the United States (20%), Australia (16%), Beijing (urban) (13%) and New Zealand (12%). This was still lower than Singapore (50%) and Beijing (rural) (38%) (APIAS 2001a) but obviously was a significant problem. All this shows that the problem of the elderly cannot be neglected.

### **The Situation of the Elderly in Hong Kong**

Chow and Chi (1997: 173) describe the elderly in Hong Kong as follows:

...Most of them have come from an agrarian social and economic background and are now the first generation to grow old in a highly industrialized city. It is therefore not surprising to find that the majority of the elderly in Hong Kong are unprepared for the kind of retirement life which they are now experiencing.

The population census conducted in 2001 indicates that there are 747,052 old people aged sixty-five and over in Hong Kong, representing more than 11% of the population (Census and Statistics Department 2001). Among them, 46% are men while 54% are women (ibid). In year 2002, the life expectancy of men is 78.4 years old, while that of women is 84.6 years old (Census and Statistics Department 2003). Women are thus expected to live 6.2 years longer than men do.

In 2001, 25,213 of old people aged sixty-five and over have died (Department of Health 2003). The five major causes of deaths among old people are malignant neoplasms (30.2%), heart diseases (15.8%), pneumonia (11.1%), cerebrovascular diseases (10.9%) and chronic lower respiratory diseases (7.7%) (ibid). Many old people in Hong Kong suffer from illnesses such as arthritis, hypertension, fractures, peptic ulcers, diabetes and chronic bronchitis (Leung and Lo 1997; and Ho and Woo 1994). It has been suggested that illness is the major cause of elderly suicides (Hong Kong Daily News 2002h), which I discuss further in chapter five. Two hundred and seventy old people committed suicide in 2001, occupying twenty seven percent of all suicides in Hong Kong during the year (ibid).

In 2001, only 7.2% (53,990) of old people aged sixty-five and over are still in the labor force (Census and Statistics Department 2001). It has been said that old people in Hong Kong are among the poorest in society, “since most of them [are] not receiving any retirement pensions” and that “their only way to maintain a living [is] to rely on their own savings or the support of their children if available” (Chow and Chi 1997: 174). As of September 2002, 141,897 old people are receiving Comprehensive Social Security Assistance, representing over half of the recipients (Hong Kong Daily News 2002j) and almost one-fifth of the elderly population. Another 60% of old people are receiving Old Age Allowance of a few hundred dollars per month (Social Welfare Department 2003a). Old people can also apply for Disability Allowance from the government. Surveys conducted by organizations in Hong Kong indicates that many old people are not financially supported by their children, and many old people even have to use their own savings and Old Age Allowance to aid family expenses (Hong Kong Daily News 2001b; Hong Kong



Daily News 2001c). I am going to discuss more about the financial situation of old people in Hong Kong in chapter six.

Regarding the education level of old people in Hong Kong, over 42% of old people aged sixty-five and over have never received any education, while almost 40% have attained up to primary school education (Census and Statistics Department 2001), indicating that over 80% of old people in Hong Kong received little or no education at all. Less than 4% of old people have attained tertiary education level and the rest of the elderly population attained up to secondary school or matriculation education level (ibid). Low education level means that it is harder for old people to participate productively in this knowledge-based economy.

Apparently, the elderly population would continue to increase in Hong Kong. On the other hand, old people are facing problems such as poor health, poverty, low education level and low social class, which can be barriers to the pursuit of a meaningful life in old age. Therefore, I am going to explore in my thesis how factors such as gender, health, money and education level affect the pursuit of a meaningful life among old people in Hong Kong.

## **Methodology**

My research seeks to understand the life meanings of old people in society from their own point of view. To achieve this, I have conducted interviews and participant observation. I have chosen four different fieldsites in order to investigate this topic, including a computer organization, a community center, a large public park, and a small park near a private residential area; the majority of my informants came from the first two fieldsites.

I acted as a volunteer worker in the computer classes held by a local organization called Hong Kong Seniors IT Advocates where senior citizens can learn to use the computer and the Internet between November 2000 and September 2001, and assisted in a few of their activities co-organized with other companies and organizations such as Microsoft during that period. The organization was founded in March 2000 by eight old people who started learning the computer in 1998. The person in charge and the instructor of the computer classes, who is also a registered social worker, told me that their organization is the only computer organization for Chinese old people in the world, although Microsoft only confirms that it is the only such organization in Asia. Although many community centers hold computer classes for old people nowadays, the organization targets seniors citizens who want to excel in computer learning, rather than treating it as an activity to merely pass the time. I started my fieldwork with a class which teaches old people how to turn on and off a computer at the beginning, and the majority of learners had never even touched a computer in their life before, except for removing the dust on it for their children or grandchildren. Yet, within a few months, they were already learning things that I did not know myself, such as creating a homepage. So, I learned with the old learners together. The organization had around two hundred members when I starting my fieldwork, but continued to expand as my fieldwork proceeded, resulting from their publications in newspapers, radio and television programs, exhibitions, and distribution of leaflets. I had difficulties conducting interviews with the founders in their office because many old people kept calling to ask about their computer classes. Most learners have already retired or have always been housewives, except a few who have their own business or part-time jobs. Most informants from the computer classes are relatively more well off and educated,



although many of them cannot understand English very well, and have difficulties spelling simple English words correctly, given the fact that computers and the Internet are basically English language environments.

I have also done fieldwork in a community center for the elderly under the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) between July and September in 2001. It was opened only for a year when I started my fieldwork. The social worker whom I was in contact with told me that they have about 1800 members, among which most came from private residential areas. He told me that most members only visit the center for its activities, talks, and interest classes. The center holds interest classes, such as language classes, computer classes, calligraphy classes, and singing classes, and activities such as *karaoke* singing, table tennis, and local trips to places mostly in the New Territories which many old people love to join because this gets them outside urban Hong Kong. Other old people visit the center frequently to have meals, play chess, read books and magazine, and exercise with the equipment there. Some old people go to the center every day and spend most of the day there, and most of them live in nearby public housing estates. Some of them are living alone and go to the center to find someone to talk to; some live with their children's family and do not want to interrupt their lives because they consider it as their children's family where they are being excluded; and some have problems with their family members and "escape" to the center. The center indeed serves as a very good air-conditioned shelter for these old people. My informants from the center include two different types of old people – the uneducated, poor who live in public housing estates, and the educated elderly who act as volunteer workers at the center. Although the latter are educated, some of them also obtain or plan to obtain



government assistance<sup>4</sup>. Apart from spending much time walking and sitting in the center to try to talk to the old people there, I also joined an English class to try to familiarize myself with old people who only visit the center for interest classes and try to participate in the classes.

My other two fieldsites include Victoria Park, a large public park, where old men play chess and other old people spend their days, and a small park near a private residential estate where some old women form small groups and chat every day. Besides chess playing, I also observed the activities of other old people in the park. For instance, some go there to enjoy the sun and the breeze on the benches, while others practice *Tai Chi* or even play ball games. I joined the old women who chatted in the small park every day.

My aim was to participate in and observe these old people's activities in order to have a better understanding of part of their daily life and familiarize myself with the old people so that I would be able to conduct in-depth interviews with them concerning life meanings afterwards. I chose four different fieldsites so that I would be able to look at different types of old people with different backgrounds and attitudes towards life. For instance, most elderly learners from the computer class appear to lead a rather healthy life. Most of them appear to have a positive attitude towards life and believe in "lifelong learning" which seems to have become a certain kind of trend or slogan recently in Hong Kong<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, except for the

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<sup>4</sup> Some of these informants plan to obtain government assistance because their children do not support them financially and they will be using up their savings a few years later. One divorced informant obtains government assistance since he retired because his business closed down and he failed to earn enough money for his retired life.

<sup>5</sup> The government started to promote the idea of lifelong learning among old people since 2001. In the Policy Address 2001, the Chief Executive suggested that "[t]he Elderly Commission has recently launched a three-year 'Healthy Aging Campaign' to educate the public on the importance of a healthy and active lifestyle amongst the elderly. The Commission is also studying ways to enhance the image of elderly people, including helping them to pursue lifelong learning and to participate in social activities" (HKSAR 2001). The Secretary for Health and Welfare suggests that "[s]tudies have shown that lifelong learning can enhance the ability of older persons to cope with changes in daily



elderly volunteer workers, old people who visit the community center appeared more passive – some of them attend interest classes to kill time, while others spend their whole day sitting, and talk to others only occasionally. Old people in the community center, in general, are older, less well off, and less educated than those who learn to use the computer. On the other hand, the old women who live in the private residential estate nearby and chat with their friends in the small park every day are probably more well off than the old people who play chess or engage in other activities in the much larger, public park every day, although their attitudes towards life and education background might be similar. By looking at various fieldsites, I attempt to look at the problem of how old people find life meanings in old age among elderly of different age groups, backgrounds, values, attitudes towards life and so on.

My fieldsites were all located in different parts of Hong Kong Island. Although old people all over Hong Kong can attend the computer classes or visit the public park, my research still focus mainly on old people living in urban areas in Hong Kong. Many old people living in the New Territories, especially in villages and rural areas, may lead rather different lives and have different sources of meanings in life comparing with those living in urban areas, but I have not done research there.

The interviews I conducted were informal and unstructured, as well as semi-structured. During the course of fieldwork, I talked to the old people whenever I had the opportunity. For instance, I always had informal gatherings with the old people after computer classes, and could always obtain useful information from these

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living and to lead an active life”, and “the Government was exploring ways to facilitate older persons to pursue lifelong learning. It would examine the needs for continuing education for older persons and study overseas experience, such as the setting up of a university of the third age in some countries” (Health, Welfare and Food Bureau 2001).

informal conversations. Although I had an interview guide with me (see appendix), the interviews were both unstructured and semi-structured. Half of the interviews were tape-recorded with the permission of the interviewees; the other half were recorded on paper as I listened to my informants. Each of the interviews lasted for one to three hours. I conducted sixteen in-depth interviews with old people mainly from the computer organization and the community center (see Table 1), and had short interviews with more than ten old people from all four fieldsites where I conducted my fieldwork. Apart from one informant who is only fifty-four years old, the rest of my informants are above sixty-five. I decided to include the younger informant in my research because she has lost her social roles as an economic producer and a nurturer of her children when one of her son has gotten married while the other claims independence and left her; thus she is “sociologically old”.

In my interviews, in order to explore the roles and life meanings of the old people after they have retired and their children have formed their own families, I have asked them questions concerning their present daily life, whether they feel happier now or when they were working and raising their children, what they think can make an old person’s life happy, their children’s attitudes towards them, future expectations, death, and so on.

I have tried to be careful about not hurting my informants’ feelings. I would give up asking when I felt that they did not want to talk about the issue, in order to protect them from getting depressed because of my research. Nonetheless, most informants seemed ready to talk about everything with me, especially those from the computer class whom I had known for almost a year during my research period. Since the information I obtained from my informants is personal, I use pseudonyms and address them as Ms. or Mr. X instead of using their real surnames, particularly



to protect the identity of the founders of the computer organization since they have been interviewed by the mass media many times given the organization's wide publicity.

Apart from data collected from fieldwork, I also referred to statistics concerning elderly suicide rates, aging population, health condition, and other relevant statistics provided by units like the government's Census and Statistics Department as background information on this topic, as well as newspaper articles which describe the situation of old people in Hong Kong.

Although I have only interviewed about thirty old people and they may not necessarily represent all the typical types of old people in society, I believe that there is no other way of understanding the old people other than listening to what they say. I have been trying to search for the personal thoughts and feelings of the old people, and this is a study of the particular, but not the general – different old people have different attitudes towards life and different things which give them meanings in life – even though we may be able to come up with certain patterns and similarities among them. To overcome the shortcomings of studying a small sample, I have studied the topic in various fieldsites and use mass media as a reference to check whether the data I obtained suits the general situation in Hong Kong. Statistics can also be useful as a kind of background information, but we cannot know from statistics whether old people really feel happy and contented or not.

The aim of my research is to find out how old people pursue meanings in life and gain satisfaction in old age – why are some old people happy and contented but some are not? How are they spending the rest of their life after they have retired and their children have left home? Throughout my fieldwork, I tried to develop long-

term relationships with my informants with the hope that they would then be willing to tell me how they really feel in old age.

## **Structure of the thesis**

This is a study of the pursuit of a meaningful life in old age. Before I discuss how old people find meanings in old age, I investigate the concept of old age and what being old means to old people themselves. After the discussion on the pursuit of meanings in old age, I explore some of the most important factors which affect the pursuit of a meaningful life in old age, and ended with the discussion on the issue of death before the final conclusion of the thesis.

Chapter one, the introduction, as we have seen, first introduces the significance of my research in an aging, capitalist, and industrial society like Hong Kong where “Western” individualistic values are influential while traditional Confucian values still exist to some extent. I then write about the literature that has been written on aging and meanings of life in old age, suggesting that the study of aging was a neglected area in anthropology twenty to thirty years ago. After the literature review, I discuss the relevance and importance of Hong Kong as a field for research on the pursuit of meanings in old age, followed by the methodology of the research, structure of the thesis, and the personal significance of the research to me.

In chapter two, I discuss the concept of old age and what being old means to the old people themselves, suggesting that old age is more than merely the physical state of the body. Many old people, in fact, do not feel that they are old at all and have difficulties identifying themselves as an old person. Continuity theory (Atchley 1999) suggests that people’s thoughts, social relationships, values, and so



on continue into old age. I suggest that age is also culturally defined to some extent, and the meaning of old age continue to change as society and culture change.

Chapter three explores the main theme of the thesis – the pursuit of a meaningful life in old age – after old people have lost their most important social roles as economic producers and nurturers of their children. In this chapter, I discuss the most common sources of meaning in life among old people, which include relationships and companionship, services to others, personal achievements, leisure and hobbies, and former achievements in life.

Chapters four to six explore factors which affect the pursuit of a meaningful life in old age. In chapter four, I discuss how gender may affect the pursuit of meanings in old age. I explore whether men and women lose and gain life meanings differently as they age. Chapter five discusses how health may affect the pursuit of meanings in old age, suggesting that health, or self-perceived health, is in fact a rather influential factor in determining whether old people find meanings in life or not. Chapter six discusses how money may affect the pursuit of meanings in old age, through discussing the influence of money on subsistence, autonomy, and self-esteem in old age. I also discuss how related factors – social class and education – may affect the pursuit of meanings in old age.

In chapter seven, I discuss what death means to old people and how they face death. I write about the fear of death among old people, suggesting that it is in fact not death itself that old people fear most, but the fear associated with it, such as uncertainties, sufferings, and loss of autonomy. I then discuss how religious belief and the belief in afterlife affect old people's attitudes towards death. I also try to discuss whether the pursuit of meanings is meaningful for old people if they are going to die fairly soon.

In the conclusion, I discuss why this study of the pursuit of a meaningful life in old age is important today and in the future, how old people's lives can be made more meaningful, and what the government and society can do to make old people's life more meaningful.

## **Personal Significance**

Let me discuss, in a personal sense, why I have engaged in this research. My grandmother – my father's mother – moved in to live with us when I was about to start this research, because she used to live alone and decided that she could no longer take care of herself due to the deterioration of her body. Although I have been a volunteer worker for four years before I get into the university and have encountered many old people, this is probably the first time that I got so close to old age. However, we seldom talked to each other since I cannot understand the dialect she speaks<sup>6</sup>, so I have given up interviewing her.

My grandmother gives my parents and I a very bad impression of what old age is about. She spends most of her day in her room and the rest in the toilet – she does not even come out for dinner. I wonder what she does in the room all day – does she spend all her time sleeping? She is illiterate, but she does not even watch television or listen to the radio. She used to love to play cards, but now that she no longer goes to the community center because of her bad legs, no one plays with her anymore because my parents do not know how. My father's brother and sister and their children visit her sometimes, but she always hopes that she can see her elder son – my father's elder brother – every day, which seems to give her the most

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<sup>6</sup> My grandmother was born in Fujian and continues to speak Fujianese since she arrives Hong Kong more than forty years ago. My parents can also speak Fujianese but I cannot.



meaning in life now<sup>7</sup>. She and my father never seem to have a very good relationship with each other, so living with us does not make her happier, except that my mother seems to be the only one in this world who is willing to take care of her now. Yet, it is probably only out of my mother's sense of responsibility as a daughter-in-law and sympathy for her. I cannot feel any affection between them at all.

My father talks about grandmother's life sometimes and wonders if old age must be as miserable as hers. He retired about three years ago. At sixty-one now, he thinks he will probably die in about ten years, although I keep on telling him he might have a few more decades to live and so better plan for something to do. Apart from going out to buy food for family meals, reading newspapers, and watching some television every day, he does not seem to have any hobbies. Nothing seems to be able to interest him, unlike many of my informants. I do not know whether he will be like grandmother some years from now if he feels that his legs are not good enough to spend several hours on the street every day, and his eyes are not good enough for newspapers and television. Fortunately, he enjoys red wine and beef for dinner, and action movies. At least I know that he is not going to find life too miserable as long as he can still eat, drink and see. After all, there is still something good about life for him as long as wine, beef, and James Bond and Jacky Chan's movies are out there.

Nevertheless, enjoying food and movies alone probably cannot provide enough life meanings for a person in old age. Once, I teased him, saying that he was so lazy when he was still in bed late in the afternoon. He responded by saying,

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<sup>7</sup> My father's elder brother, his wife and his two daughters used to live with my grandmother until about ten years ago when they decided to move out and live elsewhere instead. My grandmother lived alone since then, until she moved in to live with us about three years ago.

“Why should I get up? I have nothing to do even if I get up early!” I try to encourage him to find some hobbies, but it is hard talking him about this. He thinks that being old means waiting for the end of life. So I hope that he can read my thesis, and realize that life in old age can be different, that he in fact can choose what his later life can be like, especially when he is still in good health, does not have to worry much about money, and is reasonably educated. Old people like him indeed have more choices than those with poor health, financial difficulties, and little education. I hope I can help to make my parents’ old age more meaningful with what I have acquired from my research.

This thesis, of course, is also significant to me, because most probably I am going to become old one day. I will retire, and my children, if any, will leave me and form their own families when I grow old. What will I become then? Will my life be like any of my informants? How can I make my own life in old age meaningful? When I started my research, I thought that I probably will not be like any of my informants – I probably will not spend my whole day wandering in a park or learning about the latest technology from a younger person. People tend to think that they are unique and special. It was when I encountered my informant, Mr. Chu, that I started to realize that this research has much more relevance to me than I thought.

Mr. Chu teaches other old people English in the community center voluntarily. I notice that he speaks English with a proper British accent very well. In fact, it looks rather awkward for him to teach English in a class when the majority of students are not able to speak English at all. I personally think that he should rather teach university students in Hong Kong. Indeed, he told me that he used to own a tutorial center. He has taught primary and secondary school students and



some university students as well. However, his tutorial center closed down after the economic crisis in 1997. He graduated from one of the most prestigious high school in Hong Kong, and studied in a university overseas although he did not graduate. It was difficult getting into a university in the past, and many graduates from the most prestigious high schools in the past have been rather successful and quite well off. From what he told me, I think he was raised in a middle-class family. As our interview went on, I noticed that I am probably not that different from him. Yet, he sees himself as a failure – he got into university but did not graduate; he got married but divorced; he has a son but has to live alone; he opened a tutorial center but it closed down; he tried to find jobs but was unfairly treated; he has believed in God since he was small but God does not seem to provide him anything. What is even worse is that he has to rely on government assistance now, which hurts his dignity rather badly. All his life, he has tried to be a good person, but he starts to think that being a good person perhaps does not mean anything in society at all. Is his case only bad luck? Will I be like him when I grow old, feeling that I have been a failure in my life and that what I have done in life are all worthless? Will I become a lonely old person like him and have to rely on government assistance? Mr. Chu indeed looks rather pessimistic which affects his attitudes towards life now, but I am almost certain that he was not like this before he encountered all his hardships.

This is not only a research of the “other” old people, but is actually closely related to me. Not only may it enable me to help my parents in their pursuits of meanings in old age, but it may also help me better prepare for my own life in old age – it may, or it may not. It is through this research that I hope to understand how I can pursue life meanings in old age, and what possibilities and choices I could have, other than lying in bed waiting for the end of my life. I believe that the

valuable conversations and experience I had with my informants are going to influence the pursuit of meanings in my life not only in old age, but in other stages of my life as well.



**Table 1. Primary Informants**

<b>Names (pseudo.)</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Religion</b>	<b>Occupation before retirement</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>People living with them</b>
<b><i>Informants from the computer class:</i></b>					
Ms. Tang	54	Catholic	Housewife	Married	Spouse
Ms. Yung	70	Catholic	Worked in a hospital	Widowed	None
Mr. Lee	74	Catholic	Teacher	Married	Spouse and a daughter
Mr. Wong	68	Believes in Buddhism	Managerial position in mechanical engineering	Married	Spouse and a son
Mr. Chan	60+	None	Ran his own business	Married	Spouse
Mr. Tse	66	None	Teacher	Divorced	None
<b><i>Informants from the community center:</i></b>					
Mr. Wu	84	None	Miner	Widowed	A daughter and her family
Ms. Fong	80+	None	Unknown	Married	Spouse
Mr. Au	73	None	Teacher	Married	Spouse
Ms. Siu	83	Catholic	Teacher	Widowed	None
Ms. Cheung	66+	Buddhism	Salesperson	Single	None
Mr. Luk	74	Believes in Buddhism	Newspaper Editor	Single	None
Mr. Chu	66	Protestant	Ran a tutorial center	Divorced	None
Ms. Yuen	79	None	School worker	Married	Spouse
Mr. Kwan	70+	Unknown	Worked in a flower shop	Married	Spouse
<b><i>Informant from the small park:</i></b>					
Ms. Ho	82	Catholic	Housewife	Widowed	Two daughters, a granddaughter, and a Filipino maid

## CHAPTER 2      BEING OLD AND THE CONCEPT OF OLD AGE

In a legal sense, the government defines anyone over sixty-five years old as a “senior citizen” – a nicer and more respectful term for the old people in Hong Kong, which is also the case in many other countries. However, in a cultural sense, how do people define old age? We usually do not approach a person and ask for his or her age to decide whether he or she is an old person or not in our daily life. So, how do people decide whether a person is old or not? What do people think an old person should be like? What do the old people themselves think about old age? I started to think about these questions as I proceeded in my research. Some “old people” I came across are not really that old psychologically and, for luckier ones, physically as well. It seems clear that the concept of “old age” is not only a matter of figures, such that whether someone is old or not merely depends on how many years a person has lived. But how much is old age biological, and how much is it cultural?

We usually judge whether a person is old or not by appearance and physical health. Therefore, if a person has wrinkles and spots all over the face and the body, he or she must be an old person. In addition, if his or her hands are shaking, or he or she requires staff to do everyday acts, that is definitely an old person. Most old people are like that, except some movie actors or singers who are willing to spend large amount of money to inject certain kinds of substances into their body from time to time in order to look younger. In these cases, appearance is no longer a clue. We can never know how old they are unless we try to calculate how many years they have been in the show business. Is old age nothing but physical changes?

Perceiving old people as those who do not have a job and have not much to do is not very accurate either. There are people who decide that they have earned enough money and choose to retire and relax for the rest of their lives in their thirties,



such as some of those who have worked in Silicon Valley, and yet, they are not considered old. As a retired person, their psychological state can be similar to a seventy-year-old retiree – feeling that they have worked so hard in their life and it is time to relax, or planning to do things that they have not had time to fulfill in the past.

The examples that I have raised are, indeed, exceptions. However, I am only trying to question whether criteria like the number of years that a person has lived, physical state and appearance, and whether a person is considered productive economically in society are sufficient to define whether a person is old or not. In this chapter, I am going to verify that old age is perhaps a matter more than all these, and probably means more. I will try to explore the concept of old age by discussing the loss of social role and identity among old people, what old age means to the old people themselves and the cultural construction of old age.

## **Loss of Social Role and Identity Crisis in Old Age**

### ***Mandatory retirement and elderly unemployment***

Hong Kong is a capitalist and industrial city, where people's usefulness, abilities, or even values in society are often measured by their profession and income. Those who fail to find a job are always being seen as burdens on society. They are the group of people who have to live on government's assistance, and will in turn be seen as using up taxpayers' money. This may sound reasonable in some countries – it is the government's responsibility to help those who cannot go to work or fail to find a job temporarily. However, the case of Hong Kong is different – being economically non-productive can be a shame; and no one wants to be seen as a burden on society.

The same thing may apply to old people. In Hong Kong, many old people are requested to retire at sixty-five or earlier, especially in the public sector<sup>8</sup> and larger companies. As the economy goes down, companies may also use old age as an excuse to lay off older employees so that they can employ energetic young people with lower salaries as replacements. Several old people told me that no one wants to employ them because of their age.

One of my informant, Mr. Wu, for example, who spends most of the day in the community center every day, left his last job at fifty-six and could not find a job since then. Being forced to retire at a rather early age, Mr. Wu, who is widowed, told me that he feels so lonely now and really does not want to live so long. When economic productiveness is such an important measurement of personal values in this capitalistic society, many old people lose their personal value, as well as their most important role in society, when they are forced to retire. It even makes some of them think they have nothing to do in life anymore; and it does not even matter whether they are alive or not since their life has become somewhat meaningless now. To many old people, work once meant a great deal to them and had occupied most of their day for over forty years; but retirement means a total change of life for them. Many old people fail to find substitutes for that eight hours a day (and usually longer) period of time they used to spend at work. Contrary to what many younger people might imagine, retirement does not mean relaxation from work to most old people, but simply boredom, or even a sense of uselessness, especially to those who are not very well off in their later lives.

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<sup>8</sup> In the government, "the normal retirement age...[is] 60 for the civilian grades and 55 for members of the disciplined services except those officers whose prescribed retirement age is 57 in the legislation (Civil Service Bureau 2001).



Some of those poorer and retired old people will then have to obtain government assistance – the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA)<sup>9</sup> – to afford their own living, especially old people whose children do not support them financially. Compared with those under sixty-five who have the ability to work but are unemployed and are receiving government assistance, old people may face less discrimination in society. However, it appears that as the population of the old increases, as social respect for the old decreases, and as the economy declines, society seems to have less sympathy for them than before. Accordingly, many of my poorer informants have low self-esteem.

Mr. Chu, for example, whom we saw in chapter one, feels very bad about receiving government assistance since a few months before our interview. He is now sixty-six years old, but lost his job twenty years ago. He tried to work for another few years in temporary jobs since then, and opened a tutorial center later on, which closed down after the business collapsed during the economic crisis in 1997. There was no way out except for applying government assistance.

I have to obtain CSSA now. I have no students, but I need several thousand dollars a month for paying rent and having meals... I don't have much savings, so I have to obtain CSSA... If I have two bowls of rice to eat, I will teach until I die. I won't say that "It's time for me to relax and to retire." I won't think so. I will be satisfied if I have two bowls of rice to eat through teaching. But things didn't go that way. Things didn't allow me to do that. I was forced to obtain CSSA. Many people accused me, "CSSA? The government gives it to the disabled! Have you tried hard to earn money?" ...All these years, I have been trying hard to look for students. You think I don't want to look for students? But people say, "You are just lazy. You only want to get money to feed yourself in such a way!" In fact, that's not true. I have been looking for voluntary work everywhere to prove that CSSA is not supporting lazy people. Even if I am obtaining \$3,100 CSSA, isn't the work I am doing worth it? I work as a voluntary worker here and there and I am not receiving any money. ...It's not that I'm obtaining CSSA without contributing and working... I feel very unhappy, feel very bad

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<sup>9</sup> A single and healthy old person aged sixty or above, for example, can obtain \$2,555 of CSSA per month with an asset limit of \$34,000 (Social Welfare Department 2003a). As of September 2002, 141,897 old people are obtaining CSSA, representing fifty-four percent of all CSSA cases (Hong Kong Daily News 2002j).



about obtaining CSSA. Why am I so useless even though I have studied so much? I think those who obtain CSSA are useless people... I have become a useless person – a useless person in everyone's eyes.

When I interviewed him, he was teaching voluntarily at the English course for the elderly I participated in. He does not want others to feel that he only receives government assistance without making contributions to society. He still wants to believe that he “earns” money by working hard. As our interview proceeded, I realized that he only pretended to be optimistic. He feels helpless towards life without understanding why what has happened to him has happened:

Do I feel my life has meaning? Not really. I mean, I am not useful in society. People like me are useless if they don't die. They are useless in society! If, as you said, the students cannot live without me, then I will really feel that I live meaningfully. Now, I live meaninglessly, just like a disabled person. I have studied so much but society doesn't need me... You're told that it's time for you to retire, to become useless. You have worked for such a long time and have to give your place to young people. Things are like that. So, it's really a great waste, right? I have so much experience, have worked so long, and have become totally useless!

Unlike most other interviewees, Mr. Chu was well educated. He was educated in one of the most prestigious high schools in Hong Kong, and managed to study in a university overseas although he did not finish his degree. However, being unemployed in much of the last twenty years makes him feel so helpless towards life. It does not only make him lose money, but a sense of value as well. By resolving to work as a volunteer worker while receiving government assistance, Mr. Chu tries to regain some of his personal sense of worth.

Mr. Lee is also one of those who feels helpless given the mandatory retirement system. He feels that his life is not meaningful – “I am useless in society. I have studied so much but society doesn't need me anymore.” He considered it as a waste, as Mr. Chu did. Another informant, Mr. Lee, also has similar feelings towards mandatory retirement. He always hopes that he can still go to work. He was



forced to retire at the age of sixty-two. He is seventy-four years old now, yet he thinks that, “I still have the [physical] ability and the experience, but had to retire...this is a waste of social resources.” He feels so helpless before the government’s mandatory retirement system<sup>10</sup>. He questioned why a healthy and experienced person like him is not allowed to work anymore. After all, who has the right to determine who is productive and who is not? Who can decide who have to become non-productive old people in society? Why doesn’t anyone care to ask whether someone wants to retire or not? Ms. Cheung, who retired a year ago, realized that the government has made all those decisions and judgements, which she personally does not approve of – “I love to work. If someone still would employ me, I will be willing to work! ...I can still work, but insurance [companies] won’t pay... I don’t like mandatory retirement. They don’t have that in the past... There are too many laws and regulations now...but not much affection.” She recalls a time when everything was only based on trust rather than contracts and documents, in places where she has worked. She was also suggesting that people should not be forced to retire as soon as they reach a particular age.

This is not only a problem regarding retirement, but elderly unemployment as well. Some of my informants were asked to leave their workplaces before the age of sixty-five. Many of them become unemployed afterwards. Some lucky ones succeeded in finding part-time or temporary jobs; other of my informants tried, but failed. Most of them never attempted to look for any jobs although they want to be employed again, because they think that no one is going to employ old people anyway, since their market values are very low.

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<sup>10</sup> Mr. Lee was a teacher before he retired, which generally observes the retirement age of civil servants.

### *Loss of social role and identity crisis*

Apart from being financial contributors of society, old people also lose some other social roles as they grow older. In most cases, their children leave home and form their own families, and thus their social role in bringing up their children comes to an end. Even their friends and old relatives die one after the other. Many old people just feel that they have nothing to do in their lives anymore – they have no social and family roles to play.

Mr. Wu told me at the beginning of our interview that he finds old age boring, especially because he used to be an active person. He loves travelling, but he told me that no one accompanies him anymore since his wife died. He said he has nothing to do now, except walking in the parks and going to the community center every day. Although he is “living with” his daughter’s family, he told me, “I don’t have a home to return to”. Perhaps it is because it is his “daughter’s family” that he spent most of his time in the community center and has meals there, although he claimed that his daughter is very busy and he does not want to disturb her. It is perhaps also because it is “his daughter’s family” that he wants his public housing application approved as soon as possible<sup>11</sup>. When asked about future expectations in life, he said he only wishes to live alone as soon as possible because he does not want to bring troubles to his daughter. But is this really what he wants if he has other choices? Hidden under this “only wish” he had before the end of his life (he is already eighty-four and not physically healthy), I am certain that he would have wanted other things. When asked what makes an old person happy, he said,

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<sup>11</sup> At the end of the fiscal year 2001/02, 86,000 applicants were still on the waiting list. “The average waiting time for the Waiting List applicants to be allocated with HA [Housing Authority] PRH [public rental housing] flats in the year 2001/02 was 3.2 years” (Hong Kong Housing Authority 2003).



Children should accompany them [their parents] to go to *yum cha* (having tea and *dim sum* in Chinese restaurants) sometimes, so they don't have to be left alone with nothing to do... My daughter brings me out to *yum cha* about once every month... I dare not suggest we go. I'm afraid she won't respond, or she has no money to go...

My daughter has no time. She has to go to work. In the past, I used to take care of my grandchildren. I brought them to school, and I felt happier at that time.

We can see that he actually wants companionship and care from his children and grandchildren, but now that they all have their own life, he feels that he has lost his role as a father and a grandfather. All he wants now is to separate from them by living alone or spending the whole day in parks and the community center to avoid disturbing his daughter and her family. All these may appear rather strange – a father who brought his children up, gave them education, and brought every single cent he earned home in order to feed his children has now become an outsider of his children's family. Unfortunately, Mr. Wu is not an exception. Other informants also told me that they lead rather separate lives from their children. A few do not even talk much about their children even when asked during the interviews, as if they are not certain about what is going on with them, or reluctant to let me know they do not see each other very often. As Hong Kong become more “Westernized” and “families” become nearly equivalent to nuclear families, more and more widowed parents are being excluded from the list of family members and become outsiders, which leads to a loss of family role and identity.

In fact, physical changes and loss of social role may result in identity crisis among old people. Many of my informants refused to admit that they are old only because they are economically non-productive and look physically old. These are



just external factors. Internally, or psychologically, many of them do not feel old.

An article written by one of my informants<sup>12</sup> states,

Throughout my life course, I never felt old. Only when my children grew up, or even get married, I sighed. Unconsciously, I have already reached this age... Biologically, [I am] one day older than the other; psychologically, [I] cannot be in the same pace, always feeling that I am still young. However, paces slow down; hands slow down also ...names that I have always uttered cannot be remembered in any way.

His piece probably represents what many other informants also think. It is always external factors, such as physical deterioration, grown-up children, and loss of social and family roles, which make them “realize” that: “I am an old person now!”, or that they are regarded as being one. This may result in an identity crisis among the aged – realizing that they are identified as being old, but unable to accept it.

Seventy-four-year-old Mr. Lee, for example, who is still actively learning and assisting others in learning computers, recalled his shocking experiences of being addressed as an old man (*a baak*, in Cantonese) for the first times.

The first time...when I was still teaching at school, a child came to me and asked, “*A baak*, where should I stand?” I felt like I had an electric shock! No one ever called me “*a baak*”! This was the first time...

Once, we go out to distribute leaflets [for the computer organization]... A Filipino maid hit me with a baby-cart and the four ladies next to me all came to me immediately – “*A baak*, are you okay? Were you hit by the cart?” I said I was perfectly okay... I think they feel that I was very weak and will get hurt easily. But I was thinking, “Am I that weak? I was hit and they were so anxious!” Ha!

Mr. Lee told me that he still offers seats to others in public transportation sometimes, but as a seventy-four-year-old man, he is of course always being rejected. It seems that he fails to understand and accept why people refuse his offer, since he thinks he is still physically healthy and does not need a seat at all. He thinks that

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<sup>12</sup> In order to keep my informant anonymous, I do not give the reference for this article.



young people give seats to him because they have more respect for elderly people now, instead of thinking that it is because he has grown older.

It's usually me who give seats to others. For example, I always give seats to old women in the MTR [subway]... Some of them won't sit; some young people immediately give their seats to me after I've given mine to the old women... Some said, "*A baak*, take this seat!", and I'll say "No, thanks! I'll stand"... I think they respect me... What's the big deal of standing for a while in an MTR train? ...I only feel that some people have more respect for me. No one gave seats to me in the past, but now some do – only within these couple of years... I really don't need to sit. I can stand...

Recently, he started to notice that his hair is turning white, and was considering dyeing it. It seems that he began to realize that it was his appearance, like his gray hair, which makes people think that he is old, and thus he decide to change it so that he can look younger from the outside. Externally, he looks old; but internally, he does not find himself old at all. This creates confusion or even an identity crisis in him. So, if the two can be the same, it seems that confusions will disappear – if he changes his appearance by dyeing his hair, maybe he can feel young and look young at the same time. Of course, things are probably not so simple. Things other than appearance still make him an old person – retirement, children getting married, deteriorating health, or even the students he taught in the past and still have contact with who have already grown up.

If identity crises exist among old people, the next question would be how old people deal with the crises. This is an important question, because identity crisis could be a terrible thing – people may commit suicide because they are not sure about who they are. Of course, most old people do not commit suicide because they cannot accept the fact that they are considered old when they consider themselves still young at heart and productive. Some old people manage to accept the fact of growing old, but some may not. Dyeing hair, for example, can be considered a way to seek to avoid being seen as old. Different old people have different ways of



dealing with old age – some perceive growing old as a natural process and have not done anything about it, while many others try to make themselves look and feel younger.

As a former primary school teacher and by character a well-organized person, Ms. Siu, now eighty-three, told me she planned her retired life when she was still in her middle age, unlike most other informants. She knew that she would be lonely after retirement, since children will have their own families, which appears a natural thing to her. She has a timetable for all the activities she is now engaging in, including Chinese calligraphy, table tennis, Chinese opera, and listening to music. She said,

Old people's life shouldn't be boring. There is a life both before and after retirement... So, one should organize one's life, and find something to do... These are just different stages in life. Being old is not an end, but a stage. It's a natural cycle, like plants and everything else. People have to understand these stages. Besides, we should give chances to young people, so it's right for people to retire at sixty...old people don't have enough strength...

By looking at old age as just a stage in one's life, Ms. Siu accepts old age as a fact of life. However, I could not help noticing the bright red lipstick, colorful cartoon T-shirt, and fancy strips for holding her glasses that she wore during the interview. Most people, including me, will probably think that it is rather awkward for an old woman to present herself in such a way. Since she thinks that old age is a stage in life, it seems contradictory when she is doing things which seem improper at her age according to social norm. Is she telling me the truth when she said she accepts old age as a stage of life, or simply that she perceives old age differently such that it is perfectly all right for an old woman to dress like a young woman? Perhaps, she manages to accept old age psychologically, but not physically. She still wants to look young from the outside. She can organize and change her life upon retirement,



but she cannot do much about physical changes. Another possibility is that she identified herself as being old, but does not want to be identified as an old person. I am certain that she will feel hurt if somebody calls her “*a pòh*” (old woman) on the street. So, what did she really mean when she said she accepts old age? It appears that Ms. Siu still have confusion in her old age identity.

Another informant, Mr. Lee, tries to make himself younger through engaging in certain activities. He developed an interest in the Internet about three years ago, and participates in Spanish-speaking chat rooms. The computer makes him feel younger. Yet, the best thing about Internet communications to him is that no one knows how old he really is! He had experiences of being excluded from conversations when people know that he is an old man. Being interested in photography, he is learning how to use digital cameras and post the photos he took on web pages. Therefore, by engaging himself in the latest technology, Mr. Lee tries to make himself younger. Again, he started to realize that old age is something that he cannot deny after his shocking experiences of being called “*ah bak*” as discussed earlier. Despite all the Internet chatting and digital photo-taking that he has engaged in, he knows that once people see him, he is identified as being old, but still finds it hard to accept.

### **Being Old and Its Cultural Construction**

One question that I began to ask my interviewees as my research proceeded was whether they feel old themselves; and if so, how they feel about this. At the early stage of my research, I had taken for granted that they certainly know that they are old and will feel old as well. However, as I started attending the computer classes for old people and got acquainted with some students and founders of the



organization there, I started to think differently. For instance, the way that people there address each other is usually similar to that of addressing a young or middle-aged person rather than the way we address old people on the street or in community centers – such as “Fài gò” (Elder Brother Fai) instead of “Fài sūk” (Uncle Fai where *sūk* also refers to father’s younger brother) or “Fài baak” (*baak* refers to father’s elder brother, which is also used to address an old man who does not have any kinship relations with the addresser). Other old people are also addressed by names that they have always been using in the past, instead of changing into new names and forms of address as they grow older. Among Chinese, the way a person is addressed usually reflects the age and social status of the person with respect to the addressee. Therefore, by calling someone “Fài gò”, it implies that he probably is about the same age and generation as the addressee, which I started to find strange when I think about that carefully. In the computer-learning environment among the old people, I am the youngest among the group, and the instructor is in his thirties, and yet, we are addressing each other as if we are of similar age, and as if we are a group of young people. So, it seems that the computer classes have become a setting where a group of old people can ignore their age temporarily and engage themselves with young people’s activities. Unlike on the streets, and in community centers with social workers and volunteer workers, they will not be identified as old people, or feel hurt when being called “*a baak*” (an old man), or “*a pòh*” (an old woman).

It was under such circumstances in the computer classes and tea gatherings after classes that I started to think about whether the “old people” that I have been interacting with actually feel old or not. I started to discover that there are not many situations where old age is mentioned, except when the instructor asked whether anyone was interested in certain computer-related activities organized for the old. In



this particular case, I think it only indicates that the old people realized that they are categorized as old people, but what age and old age mean to them can be another question. Ms. Siu, for example, declared – “Age is just a number! I won’t consider myself old. I will still wear clothes of bright colors!” – when asked whether she feels old. When being asked the same question, another informant, Mr. Tse, replied, “Of course, I feel old! When I look into the mirror, I feel old. But I don’t submit to it, or else, I won’t climb three steps on the staircase in one step...” Seventy-four-year-old Mr. Luk replied to the question by saying, “Yes, I feel old. There are many things that I can’t do now, especially physically. My heart also feels old. It’s different from that of a young person now, but I am not being pessimistic...” Another female informant told me she feels old when her eyes started to turn bad and could not see very clearly. A few years ago, she started going to the hospital frequently. She said that old is not a good thing.

Again, it is physical appearance and health deterioration that remind these old people of being old. Some of them still do not feel old internally. Perhaps, if I have not brought up the question of whether they feel old or not, many of them will continue to talk about “other old people” during our conversations. When asked about questions like “what do you think can make an old person happy?”, some informants appear to talk about those “other old people” out there, and excluding themselves. However, when I asked, “What about you?”, their answers were often quite different.

Robert Atchley (1999: 95-96) sets forth continuity theory, which stated that, “despite widespread changes in health, functioning, and social circumstances, a large proportion of older adults showed considerable consistency over time in their patterns of thinking, activity profiles, and social relationships”. According to this



theory, activities, values and even meanings continue into old age. They do not change or disappear all of a sudden when a person reaches sixty-five and retires. It can also imply that it is hard to draw a border between old age and the period before that. After all, is there really a category called “old people”? It might be easier to categorize “infants” and “adolescents” judging from the development of their mental and physical state, but what about “adults”? How can we further subdivide this group of “adults” into young people, middle-aged people, and old people, apart from simply using numerical age as a separator? What criteria shall we put into consideration other than numbers?

For seventy-year-old Ms. Yung, for example, her present life and her life before retirement do not make much difference to her, or so she claims. She still meets her friends, relatives, and previous colleagues frequently, and continues to learn what she has been learning before she retired, together with other new things, like the use of the computer.

After I retired, I learned using the computer, dancing, swimming, *qigong*, and so on... I didn't start practicing *qigong* after I retired, but when I was working in the hospital. We spend 15 minutes during lunch hour to practice that at that time; now, I can do that anytime. I've always been very eager to learn. Let me tell you, I learned about tourism when I was in my thirties; and I learned making-up, flower arranging, cookery, and making clothes... I kept on learning even when I was working, so after I retired, I learned everything. I'm very busy now, but there are still things that I want to learn. I still don't know how to write [Chinese calligraphy]! ... Because I have many hobbies, there were still many things that I wanted to do after I retired.

...I haven't lost contact with anyone, for example, with my colleagues... I keep on seeing my ex-colleagues, such as through participating in annual dinners, farewell dinners, and so on. I'm seeing seven groups of people now, including my relatives, colleagues from three different hospitals, [ex-]classmates, other colleagues, and other friends... That's why I'm so busy every day... I haven't lost connections with these groups of friends. We used to see each other in the office in the past, now they come over to my house, go to *yum cha*, and so on... So, time passes easily!



It seems that there was not a very clear transition from middle age to old age for Ms. Yung. Her life has not changed much, except that she does not have to work from nine to five in the same place anymore, however, being a founder of the computer organization, she spends hours of work on it every day. The most important thing is that her directions and attitudes towards life have not changed much throughout all these years. Sharing her love and happiness remains the most important mission in her life. For Ms. Yung, activities, friends, and personal values continue as she grows older.

I would suggest that age is also culturally defined. It is also a social and cultural construction, just like gender and ethnicity. People do not naturally “become” old people, even though aging itself is a natural process – just as sex and race are mostly biological but gender and ethnicity are not. It is culture and society which define who the “old people” in society are. By labeling people over sixty-five as senior citizens and having mandatory retirement, for example, the Hong Kong government as a social institution helps to construct who are designed as old people in society. The concept of old age also differs cross-culturally and changes through time to a certain extent. As people live longer than before and technology advances, the absolute age that people consider as being “old” will continue to rise – if most people live until a hundred and twenty years old decades later, then sixty would become the absolute “middle age”. Abeles et al. (1994: 135) write,

At the turn of the current century, when the average life expectancy was 49, people in their early and mid-forties were “elderly”. Going back in time, differences between the meaning of various age groups then versus now become increasingly striking. Two thousand years ago, a 22-year-old was an “older” person, because the average life span at that time was 22 years. Today, age 22 connotes someone barely out of adolescence; a “young adult”. A 45-year-old was a marvel of longevity during the middle ages, when the average person lived for 33 years, but that age today carries no shred of sense of “elderly”.



Moreover, age constitutes an important part of a person's identity. We may think that the old people are reluctant to accept the fact that they are old. However, identity is partly a self-construction. It is not for us to define who they are, or whether they are old or not. If cultural relativism tells us to understand and interpret the behavior and values of people of other cultures with their own values and internal logic, perhaps, we can have "age relativism" also – we should understand and interpret the old people in terms of their own values and rationality. Only the old people know exactly what aging is all about, and only each individual knows what it feels like to be old in his or her particular way.

Nonetheless, saying that "old age" is a culturally-defined category and that personal meanings continue into old age does not make my research worthless. I am trying to investigate how old people find meanings and life satisfaction after they have retired and their children have left home. It involves changes in events, not merely absolute age. Although I seek to investigate their meanings in old age, I am not saying that those meanings necessarily have to appear all of a sudden after these old people retired. Those meanings can continue from their thirties or fifties. Some old people may discover new meanings in old age, but some may not. It is necessary for us to look at the concept of old age and how old people themselves think about it before we proceed to discuss how they find meanings in their later life. This is what I have sought to do in this chapter.



### **CHAPTER 3      THE PURSUIT OF A MEANINGFUL LIFE IN OLD AGE**

Having discussed what old age means in the previous chapter, I am going to explore in this chapter how and where old people can pursue life meanings in their later life through the discussion of my informants' experiences. I suggested in the previous chapter that old people lose some of their social roles as they age. As they lose these social roles, they also lose important sources of meanings in their lives. What other sources of meanings and purposes in life can they find if their children and companies do not need them anymore, and they are sometimes seen as changing from contributors to burdens on society and family? Where else can old people find meanings in after these important roles in their earlier life are gone?

Kaufman (1986), in discussing the United States, develops themes – such as marriage, work, self-determination and need for relationships – as sources of meanings in later life from her informants' life stories, which can be unique to each individual informant. Fontana (1977) suggests four ways of growing old and categorizes the American old people she interviewed into the relaxers, the do-gooders, the joiners and the waiters. The relaxers “choose their schedule of activities and pace of life by engaging in pursuits that have always interested them, or in new projects, or by quietly relaxing, tilling the soil, or watching television. They do not do this to fill the void of empty moments but to enjoy themselves...” (Fontana 1977: 73). The do-gooders “are the Samaritans who give their time and effort to provide services and activities for other elderly. They...find meanings for their older years by engaging in an unpaid kind of service which closely resembles work...” (Fontana 1977: 86-87). The joiners “are those older people who have decided to spend a large portion of their time and energy to have fun... The more clubs one joins, the more travels one embarks upon, the busier one keeps himself, the more fun one seems to



have” (Fontana 1977: 94). The waiters are “composed of individuals who have given up on life... They are waiting for death, and some of them cannot understand why they are still alive. The waiting attitude permeates their daily lives and the daily routine becomes a waiting routine...” (Fontana 1977: 103). These four types of old people Fontana describes can be found among my informants and the old people I met during my fieldwork. However, it should be noted that these four types of old people are probably ideal types emerging from her fieldwork. It is not necessarily easy to define which type an old person belong to, and an old person can belong to more than one of the four types of old people Fontana describes. For instance, are those old women who gather at the park near where they live every day the relaxers or the waiters? On one hand, they belong to a certain social group and they can always join the group and chat for a while when they want to. On the other hand, some of these old women seem to suit Fontana’s (1977: 103) description of the waiters. Besides, how can we decide whether an old person who spends much time watching television at home is a relaxer or a waiter? Is it easy to tell whether he or she is really enjoying it, or doing it because there is nothing else that he or she wants to do? Furthermore, a few of my informants are both do-gooders and joiners – voluntary work also constitutes one of the activities that they choose to join and have fun in, which keeps them busy all day in addition to other activities they engage in.

In my discussion of the pursuit of a meaningful life in old age, I will not develop different themes from individual informants, nor will I classify my informants into different types regarding how they pursue meanings in life. Instead, I am going to discuss several major sources where my informants find meanings in based on my fieldwork. Nonetheless, the works of Kaufman (1986) and Fontana



(1977) are very useful references in exploring how old people find meanings in their later lives.

### **Important sources of meanings in later life**

What Kaufman (1986) suggests seems quite true – different old people have different sources of meanings in life. Therefore, one thing that provides important meanings for one old person may not mean anything to another old person. In this section, I am going to discuss several important sources of meanings which a larger portion of my informants appear to find life meanings in, which includes relationships and companionship, services to others, personal achievements in old age, leisure and hobbies, and former achievements in life. As suggested in the last chapter, activities, values and life meanings can continue into old age (Atchley 1999: 95-96). Therefore, these sources of meanings in later life that I suggest, too, do not necessarily only emerge when my informants become “old”. These sources provide important meanings to my informants now that they are in their old age, but they may already have been important sources of life meanings in their earlier stage of life, or throughout their whole lives.

#### ***Relationships and companionship***

People commit suicide sometimes because they feel that no one cares about them, and their family and society does not need them anymore. Relationships and companionship can perhaps be regarded as basic criteria for a person to live happily and meaningfully in a society, and are thus important sources of meanings in life. Baumeister (1991: 213) writes,

Loneliness is strongly linked to unhappiness, depression, and other woes. ...There is ample evidence that most people need other people in order to be happy. It doesn't seem to matter a great deal who these others are or

what the relationship is, but having some intimate bond is important, perhaps, even necessary, for happiness. High levels of happiness are rarely found together with social isolation.

The same thing seems to apply to the old people I investigated. Although children leave home to form their own families and friends may die one after the other, remaining social relationships and support may still provide important meanings and happiness in old age.

### I. Family

As discussed earlier, old people may lose one of their most important roles as nurturers of their children when they grow old. However, this does not necessarily mean that children cease providing any meanings in life as people age. Children can mean a great deal throughout people's lives. When asked what makes an old person happy, seventy-year-old Ms. Yung, for instance, suggested that "it is having many children and grandchildren who all respect him or her". Although she is living alone, she told me that she sees her children and grandchildren very often and brings them soups sometimes. She showed me a photo sticker she took with her daughter, son-in-law and two grandchildren recently. She told me that each of her children gives her money to spend. On the other hand, as we have seen in chapter two, Mr. Wu, who has seven children and is now living with a married daughter, wished that his children can bring him to *yum cha* more often, and suggested that he felt happier taking care of his grandchildren in the past.

Although children leave home to form their own families, to Ms. Yung, having children and grandchildren who respect them still provides meanings and happiness to old people. She herself still has good a relationship with her children and grandchildren, which provide her with happiness in life. Whereas for Mr. Wu,



going to restaurants with children and helping to bring up grandchildren can provide meanings and happiness to an old person.

Ms. Tang told me that she attends computer classes because of her younger son, despite the fact that she began losing interest in it:

Why do I learn computer? Because I am going to leave Hong Kong and I have a son here<sup>13</sup>. Due to time difference, he will either be sleeping or hurrying to go out to work [when I call him] and [I] don't want to disturb him... But with e-mail, even if he doesn't call [me], and I want him to do something or phone me up, I can e-mail him. So, I mainly want to learn how to use e-mail there [in the computer class]..."

Her two sons have always been important sources of meanings in her life, as she told me about the happy memories they have given her when they were small. Yet, they still give her important meanings in some way with the happy memories in her mind and the concerns she still has about their lives even though they have already grown up and become independent.

In fact, learning to use the computer not only facilitates communications with children overseas, a newspaper article suggested that it also narrows the generation gap between parents and children – “As technology advances, ‘digital divide’ can easily exist between parents and children, and parents’ authority is being challenged... Since young people obtain information from the Internet earlier than their parents, parents’ role of providing information and judgement in the past is being challenged” (Hong Kong Daily News 2001a). A newspaper article reports why one of the founders of the computer organization started learning to use the computer, “Two years ago, at the height of the Internet frenzy and with her grandchildren spending hours a day on the computer, Lam, who had no knowledge of

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<sup>13</sup> Ms. Tang migrated to Vancouver in 1989. She came back to Hong Kong in 1996 because her younger son, whom she still worries about, wanted to come back after he graduated in Vancouver. She told me that she is going to return to Vancouver in a few months’ time when we had our interview. She hopes she can communicate with her younger son through e-mails after she returned to Vancouver, which is the major reason why she attends the computer classes.



the contraptions, started to feel a little left out. So, she decided to gear herself up to go hi-tech and managed to find a basic computer course tailor-made for retired people, ending up breezing through it” (Lau 2000). When I came to know her, she has already had her own homepage – something that even her grandchildren might not have achieved.

A few of my informants have children who have not got married yet. They still have expectations on and worries about them. Mr. Wong, for example, who has an unmarried son and an unmarried daughter, said:

I hope they can find suitable partners and form their own families soon. Every parent hopes so... I am not going to miss them when they leave home. It's a natural process. But some young people die for love too easily, and some have many boyfriends or girlfriends...

Mr. Tse, whose wife divorced him ten years ago, also has certain expectations towards his son:

My son is now living with my [ex-]wife, and I meet him once a week. I used to give him \$2000 a month until three years ago when he asked me not to. I can't afford the living of my son anymore... I told my son that I won't be a burden to him... I won't expect my son to support my life in the future. It's good if he doesn't have to rely on me... What's most important in my life now? I hope I will stay healthy...and I hope my son will be a good person.

In the past, people expected their children to support them when they grow old, but it seems that none of my informants expect their children to support them financially or live with them in old age, although some of them hope that this may happen. It seems, judging from my interviews, that parents nowadays only expect their children to find a decent job, marry the right person, or simply be a good person, rather than supporting them in their old age. It is not being able to rely on their children which makes life happy and meaningful for these old people I interviewed, rather, it is their love and expectations towards their children which still give them meaning in old age.



Apart from children, a spouse can also provide important meanings in old age.

Ms. Tang told me,

I won't think how long I will live, but I have always hoped that I can die earlier than my husband... I am very certain that if my husband passes away, I won't be very strong. I will become disorganized. If my husband passes away, I will collapse... My husband has backed me up...

Yes, he is very important to me. I always tell him, "Don't go away [die]. Even if you go, I will pull you back... How can I live without you?" My husband is my everything...

However, most of my informants do not seem to be able to find meanings through their spouse. During my fieldwork, I only came across one couple who attends the computer classes together, another couple who practices *Tai Chi* together in the morning and continues with their own activities separately after breakfast, and a wife who accompanies her husband to the community center for some exercises because he cannot walk by himself. It is perhaps common for husbands and wives to have different interests and hobbies, but the rest of my informants did not mention the importance of their spouse to them as Ms. Tang did. A few of them even appeared to try to escape from my question about their relationship with their spouse, especially among men who are perhaps more reluctant to talk about it – men are usually not the ones who would say they cannot live without their wife. Other informants have remained single throughout their lives and some informants' spouse had passed away already. A small number of my informants explicitly said they had bad relationships with their spouse – one of my informants spends most of her day in the community center because she hates her husband.

## II. Social networks and support

Social networks and support are other forms of relationships and companionship which provide important meanings in old age. Chrohan and



Antonucci (1989) write about the importance of friendship in providing senses of usefulness and self-worth in old age:

...Arling found that the number of friends in one's social networks was related to less loneliness and worry and to feelings of greater usefulness and respect within the community for elderly widows... Spakes reported that the number of close friends and satisfaction with the frequency of contact with friends each were related to the life satisfaction of the elderly... (1989: 133)

Friendships...may serve as the principle avenue for ego testing and the reaffirmation of self-worth in old age. Friends can shield the elderly from negative self-evaluation by making them feel competent, liked, and needed... (1989: 139)

After widowhood and retirement, old people need the relationships with others who appreciate them and share their needs and interests... The voluntary and mutual nature of friendship serves to sustain a person's sense of self-worth... (1989: 139)

Relationships have always been important sources of meanings to Ms. Yung whose husband died a few years ago – whether it is the relationships with family, friends and colleagues. In fact, she finds life meanings through her love and care to other people, which she also obtains in return. She treasures the relationships with her friends – part of our interview was done on her way to her friend's funeral. During our interview, her mobile phone calls interrupted us from time to time. She told me that her mobile phone facilitates her to arrange mahjong gatherings. She emphasized to me several times how popular she is among her friends and former colleagues she knew at work and how close their friendships are:

...I haven't lost contact with anyone, for example, with my colleagues... I keep on seeing my ex-colleagues, such as through participating in annual dinners, farewell dinners, and so on. I'm seeing seven groups of people now, including my relatives, colleagues from three different hospitals, [ex-]classmates, other colleagues, and other friends... That's why I'm so busy every day... I haven't lost connections with these groups of friends. We used to see each other in the office in the past, now they come over to my house, go to *yum cha*, and so on... So, time passes easily!

Maintaining close relationships with other people thus provides important life meanings to Ms. Yung in old age.



Friendship also provides important support to other informants' lives. Without the support from their friends, some of my informants would probably have found life meaningless, they said. Mr. Wu's wife passed away ten years ago. He told me that he feels lonely after she passed away although they quarreled a lot when she was still alive. He also told me several times that his children do not have time to accompany him. However, now that he has made some friends at the community center where he spends most of his day at, he said that he does not feel so lonely anymore. Mr. Luk has never been married and does not have any children. He is living alone and does not have any relatives in Hong Kong. I asked Mr. Luk what the happiest thing is in his life now, and he said,

I have many friends at different ages... Some of them cook breakfast for me...and some of them go swimming with me... I also have friends at the community center. So, I don't feel lonely at all!

Unlike Mr. Luk, a few of my informants explained the intimate relationships with their friends in materialistic terms. One informant told me that he has many friends, and one of them gave him money and an expensive watch. Another informant told me that one of his former students paid for his trip to Europe. A third informant told me that a friend treated him to *yum cha*, and many friends give him old clothes and shoes which he appreciates very much. The fact that all these informants are men perhaps indicates the difficulty and clumsiness for many men in expressing their intimacy with other people, which is probably the reason why these male informants can only try to explain to me the senses of self-worth and importance that their relationships with their friends have provided them through money and gifts.

The community center, which was only opened a year ago when I started doing my fieldwork, may help to provide meanings to members who visit there. Old



people can find support and friendship at the community center where people of similar age gather. Friendship develops eventually among old people with similar interest, whether it is through playing chess, playing table tennis, singing *karaoke*, attending interest classes, or joining local trips together.

Apart from among old people themselves, some old people also develop close relationships with the social workers there. Social workers can provide important support to lonely old people. One of my informants, Ms. Fong, is a frequent visitor of the community center. She spends most of her day there and has meals at the center because she has a bad relationship with her husband. In a way, the center serves the function of a shelter to Ms. Fong, where she can stay away from her husband, whom she does not want to see. She usually sits in front of the television at the center every day, looking rather lonely. She said that she seldom sees her children and relatives anymore. I asked Ms. Fong what is most important to her in her life now, and she replied,

What are most important to me are the social workers here... They take care of us [old people who go to the community center], and talk to us... They carry out talks and health checks... I don't have to worry too much after being here...

Having someone who cares and someone who is willing to talk to them can provide meanings to old people like Ms. Fong who has no one to rely on and no one who cares and loves her. In the community center, Ms. Fong can at least find someone who respects and is concerned about her sometimes, although she still generally finds life miserable and meaningless, she told me.

Apart from the support from a community center, old people also find meanings through other kinds of social networks and support, such as groups, clubs and associations they belong to. Some of my informants told me that they are actively involved in activities of certain groups that they belong to, such as Ms. Yung



who participates in church activities and gatherings, and Mr. Luk who acts as the chairperson of an overseas Beijing-Chinese organization in Hong Kong, producing many articles for its newsletters.

The old women who gather at the small parks near where they live every day also belong to a group which serves as important social support to them. Although I have not interviewed each of them individually, from their conversations, it appears that most of these women have not much to do every day other than lying in bed or sitting on a sofa all day<sup>14</sup>. Some of them will go to the market nearby to buy food for dinner. Joining the group perhaps becomes one of the most important and meaningful daily activities for them. Some of them join the group both in the morning and in the afternoon, and spend much time there before they go home for dinner. Ikels (1983: 103) writes, "...while a parent, in a sense, relives his life through his children, he continues to live his present life with his peers. Only with a person who faces the problems common to aging can an older person truly share his fears and gain emotional support". Within the group, the old women share problems and experiences common among them, such as not being able to sleep at night, having an old relative who died some time ago, or their hair having turned white. Having someone who shares similar problems thus provides important support to old people, which can be an important source of meanings and senses of worthiness in old age. Sharing and support suggest that they are not alone in this world – they are not the only ones who encounter such problems in old age.

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<sup>14</sup> These old women probably employ Filipino domestic helpers to do housework for them since people living nearby tend to be quite well off. My informant, for example, has a Filipino domestic helper, and some old women came to the park accompanied by their Filipino maids.

### *Services to others*

Helping others is another important sources of meanings in old age. Through helping others, old people are able to regain senses of usefulness and assurance, especially after they lost their roles as economic producers in society upon retirement. They can try to prove that they are contributing to society and are not burdens of it. Fontana (1977: 86-87) identifies these old people who engage in voluntary services as the “do-gooders”:

The do-gooders see themselves as well-adjusted and happy in their retired years. Thus, it becomes their duty to help other elderly who are not so lucky...

They...find meaning for their older years by engaging in an unpaid kind of service which closely resembles work (but is not work since it does not provide for the livelihoods of the individuals; they engage in it freely and willingly, and there is no financial remuneration involved).

The do-gooders feel fulfilled by the endeavor of helping others while simultaneously finding identification and meaning in the roles filled in their helping capacity.

As old people lose some of their important social roles in old age, some are able to find new meanings in the new role through participating in voluntary services. The most important reason why voluntary services provide much life meanings in old age is probably its nature in closely resembling work, as a few of my informants have suggested. Some old people regards participating in community services as a substitute for work – such that they still go to “work” at certain times and they still contribute to society without financial reward even though they are no longer economic producers after they retired. As more people begin to see old people as burdens of society nowadays, engaging in community services can perhaps make old people feel better about themselves. These old people suit perfectly into Fontana’s description of “do-gooders”. On the other hand, not all old people who act as volunteer workers “see themselves as well-adjusted and happy in their retired years”,



and thus feel that it is “their duty to help other elderly who are not so lucky” (Fontana 1977: 86). These are the old people who receive government assistance, such as Mr. Chu whom I discussed in the last chapter. In addition to seeing community services as a substitute for work, these old people may “work” even harder and feel an even greater need to contribute because they are “paid” by society in some way. However, since most receivers of government assistance I came across tend to be less educated and less healthy, they are less likely to participate in community services. Thus, most elderly volunteer workers I interviewed still belong to the type Fontana describes.

The majority of the elderly volunteer workers I came across were educated. A few of them are university graduates. Many of them act as instructors of interest classes. These educated old people are probably more likely to feel that it is “their duty to help other elderly who are not so lucky” (Fontana 1977:86). Mr. Au, who reports news twice a week and teaches Mandarin at the community center, is one of them:

I come here to help to report news to the old people, because these old people cannot see properly – their eyes are not good enough to read newspapers and some of them are almost illiterate. They want to know what’s on the news but can’t read the newspapers...

I find this [reporting news to other old people] very meaningful. ...I want to make the senior citizens feel that they can still learn in old age through the process of listening to news report... They can then feel that they can still learn, feel happy and achieve in old age...

The center awarded me earlier on... I feel that it’s meaningful being a voluntary worker. It’s not only about serving others, but I can also fulfil myself and feel meaningful. Old people can also achieve – that’s my personal experience.

Before I became a voluntary worker here, I felt very meaningless in my life. Later on, those social workers think that maybe I can report news, and I accepted their invitation... My life became better organized then...



...if I haven't participated in the voluntary services here, I would have been less happy.

Being a volunteer worker enables Mr. Au to find new meanings and purposes in life through the pursuit of knowledge of the others and himself as well – he goes to the library every day to better equipped himself:

To report news, you need to prepare. During this process, you will be able to learn... If you only read from the newspaper, people will not be interested... In order to report the news about Beijing bidding for holding the Olympic Games, [for example,] I have to understand the history of the Olympics... In order to report this piece of news well, I have to look for relevant information. I always go to the Central Library. I have to go there about three to four days a week...

Mr. Au feels that it is his responsibility to help old people who cannot read the news probably because he is educated and knowledgeable, while those old people are not. Through helping others, Mr. Au is also able to find new meaning in his life. In addition to the feeling of satisfaction, being a volunteer worker also enables him to adopt more knowledge and makes him find life more organized and fulfilling. He said, "I don't feel myself growing old and I don't feel meaningless! ...it's not that after I retired, I will have nothing to do and only play mahjong all the time".

One thing worth noting is that many of these educated volunteer workers I interviewed always mentioned about the old people they teach as "those senior citizens" or "those old people" as if they are not old people themselves. They seem to see the old people they teach as "the other", and identify themselves as different from "those old people". Fontana (1977: 87) writes, "Do-gooders identify strongly with other volunteers and even more with the organization at large, while they see other elders as a different group. A "we-they" feeling, is therefore, prevalent among this group".

Besides the elderly volunteer workers serving at the community center, I also interviewed several old people who founded the computer organization. The



founders serve other old people by creating opportunities for them to learn the computer while charging at a reasonable price. One founder I interviewed said,

We founded the organization in 1999... We have to ask for donations of computers, and a lot of physical work is involved... I have learned to use the computer and I want others to learn this as a tool also, so that I will have no regrets in my life. This gives me a sense of achievements because I have placed certain effort on it...although we still have [financial] difficulties and the government gives us very little money...

I once helped him carry computers up the stairs to an exhibition room located on the third floor of a building. Despite the fact that he is already an old person, he did not complain at all. It seems that he has already been used to this kind of “physical work” he suggests to me. He has invested most of his savings on the organization, while he is living in poor conditions and never buys any new clothes. He would rather save the money for the organization, which certainly means a lot to him.

Another founder said,

At first, I felt a bit unhappy about that [putting too much time in running the organization]... There are many things that I still haven't learned and done... But when I think about creating opportunities for others to learn, I feel happier... You need to sacrifice a bit, and do something for others. After all, there won't be much time for me to do such things... I don't have much time left...

Helping others, of course, always involves sacrificing oneself. However, these old people still choose to continue helping others because it offers them important meanings that cannot be found elsewhere. Helping others gives old people an important mission and satisfaction in life, which brings considerable senses of worthiness and meaningfulness. Warburton et al. (2001: 598) write about how helping others benefits the old people themselves – “Helping others is clearly an altruistic or other-centered motivation, but there was also evidence of more self-oriented motivations such as feeling useful, gaining pleasure and satisfaction, and meeting people”.



In fact, the government has also noticed the importance for old people to rediscover their self-worth through volunteer work and learning new things. The Social Welfare Department has launched the “Opportunities for the Elderly Project” since 1999, which “aims at promoting the concept of golden years by assisting elders to acquire new knowledge and skills, encouraging elders to participate in community affairs, creating community spirit of care for elders, and promoting volunteerism to support and serve vulnerable elders.” The project funds activities that can “promote a sense of worthiness among elders” (Social Welfare Department 2003b.). What is the government trying to suggest with the concept of “golden years” in the description of the project? Are the years in old age “golden” since old people can do whatever they want without worrying about work, children and grandchildren, or is this related to the traditional idea of respect for the old? No matter what it means, or used to mean, some old people may find their retired years “golden”, while some may not, depending in part on how they decide to spend their years in old age. Although the project was designed to last for four year when it was launched, it will become a regular service of the Social Welfare Department from April 2003 onwards with a different theme every year, indicating government’s effort in trying to promote senses of meanings and worthiness among old people.

### ***Personal achievements in old age***

As suggested by the government project above, acquiring knowledge and skills is another important source of senses of worthiness and meanings in old age, something which is quite true among my informants. Some old people found senses of achievement in their work before they retired, but they lost this important source of meanings upon retirement. Learning new things provides them with opportunities to find senses of achievement outside work.



Learning to use the computer, for example, is an important achievement for many old people. Unlike many other interests and activities, learning to use the computer perhaps provides a greater sense of achievement – it is something that most old people have never gotten in touch with in their lives before; it is something which is thought to belong to the younger generation. Being able to use the computer, such as communicating through electronic mails and chatrooms, means that these old people who are thought to be old-fashioned and ignorant can be as witty, energetic and trendy as young people.

One founder of the organization, who has been learning the computer since a couple of years ago, told me,

Many old people are not willing to learn the computer. They think it's useless.... When you start to use it and begin to know what it is about, interest will eventually grow.... The most important thing is the sense of achievement – the feeling of really achieving something like creating a homepage.... Now, we have something to work on, something that we can achieve...

Besides learning to use the computer and creating their own homepages, establishing the organization itself is of course another important achievement for the founders.

Another founder told me,

The greatest breakthrough is that at my age, I still have this energy, and get to know some good friends to cooperate and found this organization, which is considered as a success in other people's eyes. So what else shall I wish for? Nothing more. I can really see some people benefiting [from the organization] and I already feel satisfied...

A third founder I interviewed said,

I have learned to use the computer and want others to learn this as a tool also, and I will have no regrets in my life. It gives me a sense of achievement, and I have placed certain efforts on it [the organization]...

Establishing the organization makes this founder feel that he will have “no regrets in life”, which indicates how much this means to him.



In fact, many of the informants who attend computer classes attend various kinds of classes. One said,

It's lifelong learning! I have been learning many things since I was small...from dancing...I learned tango and waltz to court girls..., *fengshui*, cooking, Chinese medicine...I have been a doctor in the past..., and I have nine driving licenses...I still swim during winter now! ...My friend asked me to come here to learn computer together with him. That's why I come...

The idea of lifelong learning is perhaps what urges old people to pursue meanings through achieving and acquiring new knowledge. Mr. Au, who goes to the library to acquire new knowledge several times a week, believes that learning is very important in old age:

...I think that old people should have something to do. They should go to learn more. They shouldn't think that they are old and there's nothing much to learn, or that they have already learnt these things in the past.... They have to catch up with the era now! ...I think, as an old person, that you still have to learn new things.

When you are working, you have to concentrate on your work. Now that I have retired, I can do whatever I like... You must keep learning and also participate in some community services so that you have something to rely on psychologically.

I asked him what is the most important thing to him now, and he said,

To me, the most important thing is...learning. It's still learning...learning until old age. Sometimes, I feel I am still insufficient... So, I still have to learn... There are many things that I don't know... So, it's very important to read books. I love going to the Central Library whenever I have time...

Going to the library to acquire new knowledge is something that Mr. Au can "rely on psychologically". This seems to be the most important source of meanings in his life.

These informants who find meanings through personal achievements do not seem to fit into any particular group Fontana (1977) describes. The closest are probably relaxers and joiners, and many of them are do-gooders as well. They engage in activities that they are interested in, but most of them are too busy to be relaxers. Most of them want to learn and achieve as much as they can, and do not



seem to have much time for relaxation. They are not purely joiners either, because they are not only spending their time and energy to have fun. Many of them seriously want to learn and achieve in old age. As one of my informants who founded the computer organization told a journalist, which I do not give the reference because I want to keep him anonymous, “Unlike the ordinary elderly centres, we’re not here to kill time. We seriously want to improve our living standard with our computer knowledge and to share it with others”. They see learning the computer and passing the knowledge to other old people as important achievements in old age, rather than just having fun. It seems that Fontana (1977) has left out this group of old people who still want to achieve in old age. After all, lifelong learning is a relatively new concept, especially when people live longer than before, age with better health, and lose important social roles. If people are going to die rather soon after they retire, why bother learning? However, if retirement leads to another new phase in life which may last for decades, achievement in old age gives important meanings to old people. On the other hand, the omission of personal achievements in old age in Fontana’s research on American old people can be due to cultural differences. As mentioned in chapter one, Hong Kong is a society which emphasizes progress and development. Some people are thus still eager to learn and achieve after they retired in order to prove that they are not useless and ignorant old people after they lost their social role as economic producers in society. Societies like Hong Kong emphasize a lot on competitiveness. No one wants to be seen as being useless or lagging behind – not even in old age.

Ginsberg (2000: 4) writes about how learning benefits old people:

Emotionally, an education experience can enhance feelings of positive self-worth, personal achievement and develop (or reestablish) self-confidence and self-esteem. As older learners participate in the educational process, their unique lifetime of talents and skills are adapted into innovative and



purposeful activity. A college course offers a new identity to the retiree as a student or adult learner. A course of studies gives the older learner the option of setting daily, weekly, monthly or yearly schedules... Meaningful activity increases the individual's positive feelings of self. By keeping academically involved, the older learner gains personal confidence. Enrolling in courses encourages the older learner to set future goals. When the older adult selects learning as an activity, personal outcomes...include feelings of enrichment as new accomplishment and strengths are realized.

In fact, some social service organizations also recognize the importance of learning and achieving in old age. Schools and programs have been established and launched for such purpose in recent years, where old people can enroll in various kinds of programs such as language, computer, painting, make-up, and even interpersonal skills (Oriental Daily News 2002; Hong Kong Daily News 2002d; 2003). Graduation ceremonies have been held, where certificates, and even diplomas and degrees have been awarded to these elderly students who have the chance to wear graduation gowns and hats in their late years (Hong Kong Daily News 2002d; 2003). The oldest graduate in a graduate ceremony held at the Chinese University of Hong Kong<sup>15</sup> last year is a ninety-eight-year-old women who has been attending classes since two years ago (Hong Kong Daily News 2002d). At the same graduation ceremony, the graduate who studied the most units and has never received secondary school education suggested that she understands herself better and feels a great sense of achievement through taking courses (ibid).

Although degrees have been given out which can be important encouragement for old people, many of these programs may not appear to be too serious to the public, which seems to be similar to those interest classes in community centers targeting mainly at old people who have received little schooling. Lingnan University is offering something different – it has launched a project for old

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<sup>15</sup> The graduation ceremony was held by The Hong Kong Society for the Aged, one of the largest elderly community organization in Hong Kong, which organizes the classes. The ceremony and the certificates presented have no connections with the Chinese University of Hong Kong.



people to obtain associate degrees from them, and applicants are required to have a minimum of secondary three (that means, grade nine) education (Oriental Daily News 2002). Since they are run by the university, these programs are rather expensive as well, costing about one hundred and fifty thousand dollars for the whole program which may last from four to eight years (ibid), which is comparable to the tuition fees of the undergraduate and postgraduate programs. Since the tuition fee is so expensive, whom are these programs actually targeting? The spokesman said, “Establishing associate degree programs for senior citizens not only can fulfil the ‘university dream’ for senior citizens, but can also prepare for those who can afford higher quality retired lives in the next generation. Apart from making senior citizens’ lives more fulfilling, [the programs] can enable senior citizens to become useful again upon receiving continuing education” (ibid). I wonder how true what he said will become. Perhaps, in the next generation, those old people who can afford such a large amount of tuition fee and are still eager to study seriously are already university graduates, so would they still care to obtain an associate degree? Postgraduate programs will have to be launched by then if resources are available. I also doubt whether old people can “become new social resources again”, unless the economy booms so much such that society needs old people to get into the work force as well.

In Hong Kong, old people only study in programs specifically designed for them. Having a university which started offering associate degrees for them is already huge progress. In other parts of the world such as the United States, however, old people may study with other younger university students together. Newspaper reports an eighty-eight-year-old man in India who is applying for his seventeenth degree, and is currently trying to finish his doctor’s degree at a university (Hong

Kong Daily News 2002i). He said, “In fact, it is this little possibility of being able to continue learning which causes me to strive to live. I think loving knowledge is equivalent to loving god” (ibid). His appearance in the newspaper probably indicates that his case is rather exceptional. However, we do not know how long it will take for such kind of “exceptional case” to appear in Hong Kong, which requires the acceptance of society and the old people themselves. For the time being, we still have to rely on organizations and the government to promote and encourage the idea of lifelong learning among old people, and provide opportunities for them to achieve it.

### ***Leisure and hobbies***

Achieving through learning and adopting knowledge indeed provide important meanings in old age; however, not every old person who attends interest classes aims at achieving something in old age. Some of them merely want to enjoy themselves and have fun; others just want to get something to do to kill time, especially since the interest classes at the community center are free. Apart from attending interest classes, my informants engage in various kinds of activities in order to enjoy themselves in old age – playing chess in parks, practicing *Tai Chi* in the morning, spending an afternoon at Chinese restaurants, writing Chinese calligraphy, travelling, and so on. Upon retirement, old people can do things that they did not have time to do before they retired, or continue to pursue in hobbies that they have always been interested in. These old people includes both joiners – who spend much of their time engaging in activities and having fun, and relaxers – who engage in activities they are interested in when they feel like.

My informant, Ms. Yung, can probably be classified as a joiner. She fits very well into most of Fontana’s (1977: 94) description of the joiners:



The joiners' idea of having fun is directly related to activity in formalized settings: The more clubs one joins, the more travels one embarks upon, the busier one keeps himself, the more fun one seems to have.

The joiners are tireless in their round of social activities; they appear always clean, smiling, and well-dressed; they are always busy, coming from somewhere and on their way to somewhere.

It has been difficult finding time to do a long interview with Ms. Yung. I always had to follow her around to lunch and tea gatherings, the office of the computer organization, on her way to a friend's funeral, and various places she had to hurry to. Apart from relationships with family and friends which have been discussed earlier, Ms. Yung also finds important meanings through engaging in her numerous hobbies, of which some of them were developed before she retired and continue into her later life. She told me several times how busy she is:

After I retired, I learned using the computer, dancing, swimming, *qigong*, and so on... I didn't start practicing [*qigong*] after I retired, but when I was working in the hospital... I've always been very eager to learn. Let me tell you, I learned about tourism when I was in my thirties; and I learned making-up, flower arranging, cookery, and making clothes... I kept on learning even when I was working, so after I retired, I learned everything. I'm very busy now, but there are still things that I want to learn. I still don't know how to write [Chinese calligraphy]! One of my hobbies is fishing. I've flown a plane too... I also love riding horses, cycling, ice-skating, diving, and scuba diving... Because I have many hobbies, there are still many things that I wanted to do after I retired.

Ms. Yung occupies her retired life with all these hobbies, together with travelling, church activities, and gatherings with friends and family. Having good relationships with others and being busy make her feel meaningful and fulfilling about her retired life.

On the other hand, the rest of my informants who find meanings through engaging themselves in hobbies and leisure activities are not as busy as Ms. Yung is. Many of them fit into Fontana's description of the relaxers. Ms. Siu, a retired teacher in her eighties, is probably a typical relaxer. She told me that she already



started planning on her retired life when she was in her middle age. She said she knew that she would be lonely after she retired, because her children would have their own families which appears natural and ordinary to her. The death of her husband almost ten years ago increases her loneliness. However, she said, “old people’s life shouldn’t be boring. There is a ‘life’ both before and after retirement”. So, she has been spending her retired life doing things that she likes – Chinese painting, Chinese calligraphy, Cantonese opera, table tennis, and tea gatherings with her friends to compose Chinese poems sometimes. She mainly finds life meanings through these interests and hobbies after she retired to replace the meanings provided through work and family in the past. She tries to schedule her present life properly such that she will not feel disorganized and meaningless about her retired life.

For Ms. Tang, although her husband and sons give her the most important meanings in life, I can feel her loneliness when her sons no longer have to be taken care of by her, and her husband returns to work again. Ms. Tang tries to fill up her time and find other life meanings through enjoying herself. When her sons and husband are not around, she attends interest classes, practice *qigong*, play mahjong, or go to *yum cha* with her friends or alone. She said, “I won’t let myself stop. If I don’t go to church or classes, I will bring newspapers to a Chinese restaurant and spend two hours there. Time is managed by yourself. You will come across a different life at different stages”. Nonetheless, her husband and sons still provide the most important meanings in her life. During the time when she has to be alone, it seems that she only tries to fill them up with some activities she enjoys. It is worth noting that she attends computer classes because she wants to learn how to send e-mails to her son living overseas, and then to kill time after she learned how to do so; she attends *qigong* and other health-related classes because she wants to improve her



husband's and her own health, she said. Ms. Tang attends classes not for personal achievement or mere satisfaction of the self, but for maintaining relationship with her son and improving the health of her husband and herself.

Unlike some informants who have various hobbies and interests, Mr. Chu finds meanings through his only hobby of tennis. Playing tennis gives him special meanings, since it is perhaps the only thing that he thinks he is good at which makes him feel good about himself, especially when he regards himself as a failure. He said,

I am thinking that if I work as a volunteer worker every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, then I will play tennis every Monday, Wednesday and Friday<sup>16</sup>... I have been playing for decades... I am not really that good at it, but I have been playing for decades. Although I am not very good, I think I can almost become an instructor...

Saying that he is not really good at playing tennis repeatedly perhaps indicates his lack of confidence, while he also wants to assure himself and me that he is really good at it at the same time. Since he thinks of himself as a failure, playing tennis and being good at it provide important life meanings to him because it helps him regain some of his self-confidence. Besides, playing tennis also makes him feel younger and perhaps more capable than younger people, as he said,

I don't feel old. I always feel that I am 18 or 22 years old...because I always play tennis... I don't feel I am sixty something...

...I only see myself as thirty something now. Many people at their thirties play tennis worse than I do.... I have been playing tennis for decades. When I was small, I played table tennis in the church. When I grew up, I played tennis. I have been playing [tennis] throughout the year and have been playing for a long time. So, I won't feel old...

Being better than younger people in tennis makes Mr. Chu feel better about himself. He urged me to learn tennis from him although I had tried my best to explain to him how much I hate sports. Indeed, it gave him much satisfaction teaching me how to play. I can feel that he really loves playing tennis, which assures him in some way.



Unlike other informants who find life meanings in leisure and hobbies through satisfaction and enjoyment, Mr. Chu's hobby provides him with life meanings through providing him with confidence and self-assurance.

### *The past and former achievements in life*

In the discussion so far, most informants tend to find life meanings in their later life through relationships and activities that they currently engage in. However, some informants do not find meanings in their later life through what is going on in their life, but what has happened at earlier stages of their life, especially at work. Some informants became very enthusiastic when they began to talk about their former achievements and popularity at work. Work can provide important meanings to people. In Kaufman's research among sixty old people in California, she suggests that

For about half of the study group, work was something that had to be done and it never provided much satisfaction. Other aspects of life such as family relations or friendships hold much more meaning. For others, especially those with professions, the work role has been a primary source of identity, and occupational achievements have been the main source of gratification and positive self-esteem (1986: 102).

Although old people lose their work role upon retirement, it does not necessarily mean that work ceases to provide meanings to them. Just as children still provide important meanings to some of my informants although their children have their own lives after they have grown up, achievements at work in the past also continue to provide important meanings to some of my informants although they have retired.

One of my informants, Mr. Wong, who retired from a managerial position in mechanical engineering eight years ago, said,

I have strong sense of achievement [in my work]. People trusted and relied on me, because I am knowledgeable. I was popular among people... I have

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<sup>16</sup> The rental fee of a public tennis court is rather cheap. Despite the fact that he is receiving CSSA, he can still afford to play frequently if he spends less on meals and other daily expenses.



less contact with my colleagues than before, but some of them still seek advice from me after I retired...

In addition to a sense of achievement, being respected and trusted provide important meanings to Mr. Wong at work. Although it appears that he can no longer find such meanings now that he had retired, saying that some of his colleagues still seek advice from him until now seems to have assured me and himself of his importance at work even after he retired. In this way, work continues to provide meanings to him into his retired life, instead of being a matter of memories alone.

Another informant, Mr. Kwan, who was forced to retire when he had a stroke five years ago, told me:

I have many friends at different ages. Some give me money, and one gave me a very expensive watch. I go to *yum cha* with them sometimes, but not in the last couple of years. I knew them at work... I worked in a florist's shop. I made bunches of flowers for people which cost over a thousand dollars. People sometimes gave me a few hundreds dollars as tips... But I can't make flower arrangements anymore. My hands are shaking...

Although he was already over seventy years old when he retired, he probably wishes that he could have continued working and gained satisfaction through making beautiful bunches of flowers. Despite the fact that he can no longer gain satisfaction through work now, he still finds meanings through memories that he had from the last few decades of work. It is personal achievements in the past and memories which give meanings to Mr. Kwan at present. Similar to Mr. Wong, present connections with people at work is the link to previous achievements and memories at work.

During my interviews, I asked my informants mostly about their present lives. However, Mr. Lee spent much time talking about his life in the past, especially in his work as a teacher, which he feels is a mission in his life. He told me many of his happy experiences and memories with his students. He said,



I felt very happy at that time. When I arrived at the playground [at school] every day, students would gather around me. They were waiting for me to arrive to school... I never shouted at students... They were only children...

I feel that I have the mission to teach children...especially those in lower middle class... I love and respect children because we can't estimate their potentials; they may become great people in the future. I met a student on the street the other day who has obtained his PhD in architecture in Britain. He used to be a naughty student...

I played ball games, ice-skating, singing, and had picnics...with them... I liked to participate in their activities which was the major reason why I had intimate relationships with them...

Some of my students still talk to me now. One [former] student said that I have been very important to him.... A thirty-year-old [former] student, who had some problems with his girlfriend, looked for me. Another [former] student in his twenties also found me. I have helped three students. One said, "I talk to my family and they don't understand. I talk to my friends and they laugh at me. So I can only talk to you. You understand me most."

Again, it is the relationships with students which enable important meanings that he used to find at work to continue into his later life after he retired. Even though his students have already grown up and may have attained higher education level than he did, he still regards them as his students whom he has to continue to advise and help.

Although most of my informants wish that they did not have to retire, what Kaufman (1986: 102) suggests appears to be quite true – it is mostly informants who work in relatively prestigious positions or professional fields who tend to find meanings through their work and achievement in the past. Work has been their sources of identity and self-esteem even after they retired, such as Mr. Lee who still sees himself as a teacher when his former students talk to him although he retired twelve years ago. Losing a role does not always mean that old people can no longer find important meanings through it – as of the parental role and the work role.



## **Old people who do not find meanings through these sources**

So far, I have discussed five major sources where my informants find life meanings as they age and lost important social roles, including relationships and companionship, services to others, personal achievements in old age, leisure and hobbies, and the old people's past and former achievements in life. On the other hand, there are old people who do not seem to engage in any meaningful activities and relationships. Are their lives in old age totally meaningless then? These old people can be the waiters Fontana (1977: 103) discusses:

...the waiters...[are] individuals who have given up on life. These individuals have a waiting attitude. They are waiting for death, and some of them cannot understand why they are still alive. The waiting attitude permeates their daily lives and the daily routine becomes a waiting routine; waiting for the center to open, waiting for the coffee to be made, waiting for lunch time, waiting for dinner, etc.

The waiters...no longer care for social approval and have given up any pretense to "look young". They dress shabbily and shave rather infrequently.

Old people who spend most of the day in the community center probably match with the description of the waiters most. Many of them spend their whole day waiting for the center to open, waiting for lunch time, waiting for dinner time, and waiting to go home as the center closes every day. Some of my informants appear to have this waiting attitude.

Ms. Fong reaches the center every day as soon it opens. She sits quietly on more or less the same place of the sofa in front of the television, waits for meals to be cooked, and leaves the center when it closes. She is probably "waiting for death, and...cannot understand why [she is] still alive" as Fontana (1977: 103) describes, since she told me that she wants to pass away as soon as possible and feel unhappy about being old, given her poor health, suffering from poverty, and the bad relationship with her husband. The relationship with social workers at the center is

the only thing which provides at least some meanings in her life now, but nothing else does.

Eighty-four-year-old Mr. Wu also waits for the center to open every day. He is also waiting for government's approval of a unit in a public housing estate, since he wants to live alone instead of living with his daughter's family. Since his wife passed away ten years ago, he feels lonely, and does not want to live that long. Having made a few friends at the center makes him feel less lonely.

A third example is eighty-two-year-old Ms. Ho who goes to the small park near where she lives to join her friends every day, although she keeps on telling me that they have nothing to talk about. I asked her to describe a typical day. She told me she has nothing to do except sleeping, going downstairs for a while to join her friends, and buying food for meals occasionally. She said she is too old to learn anything or practice *Tai Chi*. She spends most of her day sleeping or sitting on the sofa in the sitting room. She is living with two daughters and a granddaughter, but it seems that her daughters do not spend much time at home and her granddaughter did not talk to her very often.

These informants are waiters who do not seem to find much meaning through anything in life. Relationships with others still provide some meanings to them – for if they feel that no one cares about them anymore, they may have committed suicide, rather than waiting for death to come. Yet, these relationships do not seem to make them find life very meaningful either, since those relationships do not appear to be very intimate ones.

Nonetheless, old people who do not seem to engage in any meaningful activities and relationships are not necessarily waiters who find life meaningless. An old person who sits in front of the television or has walks in parks every day can be a



relaxer who enjoys watching television programs or appreciating trees, insects and people in parks. Old people do not necessarily have to join interest classes, be volunteer workers, or visit friends and relatives frequently in order to have senses of meanings in life. What matter are perhaps their attitudes towards life. A person who goes to a park to breathe fresh air and watch children play every day can feel that life is full of hope and feel meaningful. Another example is that some old people may not meet their grandchildren very often, but their grandchildren's growth and future can still be important sources of meanings to them.

Conversely, do old people who seem to engage in many activities really find life more meaningful? Fontana (1977: 102) makes the following comments about the joiners who always try to keep themselves busy – “while the primary concern of this group is that of meeting other people and engaging in activities, neither activities nor people matter much. In a frenzy of new activity and in a carousel of new faces, who move too fast to really be recognized, being busy no longer is a means to an end but becomes an end in itself”. Therefore, what my informants are busy in do not necessarily provide important meanings, but the act of engaging in them may provide some. These informants at least have something to rely on in their later life, and are less likely to find life meaningless and worthless. Kaufman (1986: 108) writes, “What people do, the content of the activities themselves, does not determine the meaningfulness of daily life. Rather, the determining factor seems to be the sense of being able to choose to do what one wants. In late life, health is a key factor that can impinge on the range of choice available to the individual and, hence, on the meaning drawn from daily activity”. Thus, it is not necessarily the kind and number of activities and relationships that an old person engages in which provide meanings in life. Life attitudes and other determining factors in life count, which also explain

why some old people find meanings in life while some do not. Apart from health which is the key factor Kaufman suggests, gender, financial condition, social status, worldview, life attitudes and personality are also important factors which affect the pursuit of a meaningful life in old age. I am going to discuss some of these factors in the following chapters.



## **CHAPTER 4      GENDER AND THE PURSUIT OF MEANINGS IN OLD AGE**

One factor which may affect the pursuit of meanings in old age is gender. Although sexual equality has always been suggested in Hong Kong since the last few decades, differences in social roles, social statuses, values, or even biological natures between men and women remains, which in turns affects how old people of different genders find meanings, how they face old age, and what activities they choose to engage in. These differences can be biological, such that, for example, women may be more able and eager to develop closer relationships with family and friends throughout their lives and as they grow older. On the other hand, as members of society, men and women are also largely being shaped by it – such that men are generally expected to be breadwinners of the family who should excel in their work, while women are often expected to manage the family properly and nurture the children – which in turn, often determine where men and women find life meanings in.

In this chapter, I will discuss how gender affects the pursuit of meanings in old age. I will first look at the changes and losses men and women face as they grow older, given their biological natures and social roles. I will then proceed to discuss whether men and women differ in their pursuit of a meaningful life as they age.

### **Do men lose more meanings than women in old age?**

Men and women play different roles in society. Although many women go to work today, men are, in general, still expected to be the major breadwinners of the family, while women are expected to look after the family and children. Many

scholars think that women's roles tend to continue as they age (Hatch 2000 [1999]: 143). No matter how old they are, many of them often have a family to take care of, and thus seem to suffer less from loss of social roles and meanings as they age. On the other hand, men appear to suffer more upon retirement as they lose their major social role as economic producers in society. One female informant suggested, "Men tend to feel more depressed upon retirement. They have to build up a new life after they retire. But women can look after their grandchildren and do housework." To what extent are these true? Do women lose less upon retirement since they tend to find meanings in family? Do men generally lose more meanings than women as they age?

### ***Loss of social roles as economic producers***

Upon retirement, both men and women lose one of their most important social roles as economic producers of society. It has always been assumed that men lose more as they retire since work has always been a major source of meanings in their lives<sup>17</sup>. During my conversations with old people, it appeared that male informants were more enthusiastic when they talked about work. Although I did not ask them to describe their work in details, some of them were very eager to let me know their achievements, experiences and respect they obtained from work, as if they were trying to show that they were not, and are not, worthless in society. These also include those old people who find much meanings in their former achievements as discussed in the previous chapter, like Mr. Lee, Mr. Wong and Mr. Kwan, who have strong sense of achievements in their work and feel proud of the popularity and respect they gained from students, colleagues and customers. As these old people

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<sup>17</sup> The 2001 Population Census indicates that 71.9% of male aged fifteen and above are economically active, while 51.6% of female aged 15 and above are economically active (Census and Statistics Department 2001).



lose their major roles as economic producers in society, it seems that some of them have difficulties finding meanings elsewhere except from their previous achievements at work. They do not want to feel that they are worthless in society. They want to feel that they are still contributing and “working” in some way like Mr. Chu whom I discussed in chapter two. For those who do not even feel that they have much achievement at work before they retire, they suffer even more, just like Mr. Wu whom I discussed in the second chapter.

Apparently, most of my male informants suffer from a loss of meanings upon retirement to different extents. What about retired women? Do they lose less meanings upon retirement too? It appears that female informants who talked about their achievements and joy from work are most likely the ones who work in higher positions and prestigious jobs.

Eighty-three-year-old Ms. Siu who used to be a primary school teacher before she retired, for example, told me,

I love to work. I was really unhappy when I knew that I was about to retire. If the government opens a school and let me teach without paying me, I will definitely go...

I still have some contacts with some of my previous students. I think friendship and affection between teachers and students are very important. I really have a sense of achievement about that...

It was happy teaching children – watching them changing from bad students to good students. Many of my students were from lower-middle class families...

However, for many other female informants, it was not achievements and the respect they gained from work which they value and lose upon retirement, but work-related relationships and financial rewards. Ms. Cheung, who retired less than a year ago when I interviewed her, said, “I felt happier when I was working. I could eat and laugh with my colleagues. But now, people [ex-colleagues] won’t go out



because of poor financial status...” Seventy-nine-year-old Ms. Yuen, said, “My happiest time was when I was a worker in a school. I played with students and there was not much work to do... It is good going to work – I would have salary and something to rely on.” Another informant, Ms. Yung, who treasures relationships with people more than anything else, still meets the colleagues she knew at work very often – “I haven’t lost contact with anyone... I keep on seeing my ex-colleagues, like participating in annual dinners, farewell dinners, and so on... We used to see each other in the office in the past, now they come over to my house, go to *yum cha*...so time passes easily!” In fact, Hatch (2000 [1999]: 144) also suggested, “women resist retirement because they do not wish to terminate social relationships afforded by the workplace”.

Both men and women lose meanings upon retirement in different ways and to different extents. Among my informants, men and women who worked in more prestigious jobs and positions tend to value the achievements and respect they used to have at work, while female informants tend to value the relationships they develop at work and the salary they received from work which help to support their living. In a way, work gives many of my male informants a sense of worthiness and usefulness in society, as seen from the sense of achievement and respect they emphasized. On the other hand, it was relationships and money that many female informants valued at work, which I think can be obtained elsewhere. Given the social roles of breadwinners of the family and major economic producers in society, it seems that men do lose more meanings than woman upon retirement among my informants. In fact, men and women lose different things and to different extents as they retire, but what men lose seem to be more directly related to work and difficult to be recovered elsewhere unless they can work from nine to five again.



### *Loss of social role as nurturers*

While men are given the role of major economic producers in society, women are often expected to be nurturers of children in a family although many of them also go out to work today. Thus, if men lose more meanings than women upon retirement, women, perhaps, lose more meanings than men when children grow up and leave home to form their own families.

To one of my informant, Ms. Tang, her husband and her two sons have always been the most important sources of meanings in her life. As both of her sons have grown up, her husband becomes the only person whom she can rely on. During our interview, she recalled many happy memories with her sons, especially with her younger son. She told me that her relationship with them becomes less intimate as they grow up. She feels that her daughters-in-law – her elder son's wife and her younger son's future wife – are taking her sons away from her. Although she still has expectations on her sons and worries about her younger son very much, I can see that she feels she is losing control of them. They are no longer the obedient little boys she used to teach and raise with all her devotion ten years ago. They have already grown up and are trying to lead their own lives – lives that she may not like. Among all informants, Ms. Tang is the person who mentioned most about her children. This probably indicates how important her sons are in her life. However, as I turned to questions about death and the most important things in her life now, her focus turned to her husband, which seems to show that she can no longer find meanings in her sons anymore – she lost her role as a nurturer of her children.

Unlike Ms. Tang, many other female informants did not seem to mention much about their children except when asked. Is it because their children are not as

important to them in their lives as in Ms. Tang's? Or is it because they do not have much contact with their children anymore so that they do not have much to talk about? Ms. Siu and Ms. Yuen both said that they love children – Ms. Siu used to teach in a primary school and Ms. Yuen loves to go to a sport center nearby to watch children swim – but both of them did not talk much about their own children. They both said, “They have their own lives”. Ms. Yuen admitted that she seldom sees her children now, but Ms. Siu seemed a bit reluctant to talk about that and only said that her children and grandchildren are all good children, which makes her feel glad. Apparently, these informants are losing their roles as mothers in bringing up their children. The remark they made – “They have their own lives” – clearly indicates their role loss as children leave home.

We have seen how my female informants lose meanings as their social role as nurturers of their children comes to an end. Do men also lose meanings when children leave home? Being the breadwinner of the family, most fathers usually have less intimate relationship with children. However, having less intimate relationships does not mean that they do not have great expectations and deep affection for their children. Men also lose their social role as nurturers of their children.

My informant Mr. Wu, whom we have seen in earlier chapters, has seven children – three of them have moved to other countries – including Canada, America and Belgium – while the rest are in Hong Kong. However, Mr. Wu has now become a poor and lonely old man who spend his whole day staying in the community center and wandering around a park nearby, thinking that he does not have a “home” to return to because it belongs to her daughter's family. Within a one-hour conversation, he mentioned a few times that his children do not have time:



My children don't have time to accompany me. So, I just wander around all alone...

My daughter wants to take care of me, but she doesn't have time...and my son-in-law doesn't like [my daughter to take care of me] very much...

My daughter has no time. She has to go to work. In the past, I used to take care of my grandchildren. I bought them to schools, and I felt happier at that time.

From the remarks he made, we can see that Mr. Wu has lost his role as a nurturer of his children and his grandchildren as well. Now that they have grown up, have their own lives and form their own families, Mr. Wu lost another major role in his life after he retired twenty-eight years ago. All that remains for him after raising up seven children is loneliness.

Other male informants mainly mentioned that they hope their children can marry the right person, be a good person themselves, be able to support their own living, and so on. These remarks seem to indicate that the informants can no longer look after their children or have control over their lives. Their parental roles seem to have come to an end.

Despite the fact that fathers usually have less intimate relationships with children, it appears from my interviews that male informants may lose as much as female informants when their roles as nurturers of the future generations have ended. Among my informants, mothers recall the happy times they had with their children when they were small, while fathers worry whether their children can lead a happy and decent life in the future. Both male and female informants lose control over their children and say that their children have "no time" to see them. If women generally find more meaning in family, they perhaps lose even more upon retirement instead of being able to continue finding meanings in family and children when they are losing both.

## *Loss of Youth*

In the last two sections, I have compared the loss of two important social roles between men and women. However, apart from the loss of social roles, how do men and women differ in their feelings towards the loss of youth as they grow older? By saying the term “youth”, I do not only mean physical appearance, but changes involved in the whole process of growing old which also include the deterioration of health, loss of abilities, changes in life events and so on. After all, what do men and women think when they feel that they have grown older?

Recall Mr. Lee’s shocking experience of being addressed as an old man for the first time in his life, which I have discussed in the second chapter. He realized later that it was his physical appearance which made people think that he is old. He has even associated that with his abilities as seen in his intention of dyeing his hair if his friend asks him to help out in a jewelry exhibition. Rather than merely a matter of physical appearance, what he was telling me seem to imply that customers at his jewelry booth may find him more trustworthy and capable if he looks younger – a younger appearance will thus lead to greater abilities. What Mr. Lee has lost is not only a young appearance, but the ability and energy that are associated with such an appearance.

A second male informant, Mr. Wong, who told me how much he was respected and trusted by his colleagues when he was working, said that sometimes he will take out the pictures he took in the past, “I will arrange the pictures chronologically and compare recent pictures with the pictures taken when I was young. I feel like – time doesn’t give way to me...”. Similar to Mr. Lee, it seems that growing old has not only changed his physical appearance, but the respect, trust, energy and probably abilities he once possessed as well.



A third male informant, Mr. Luk, said, “There are many things that I can’t do now, especially physically. My heart also feels old. It’s different from that of a young person...”. Again, growing old has led to a feeling of loss of ability in him. In the article he wrote, which I quoted from in the first chapter, he suggested that growing old involves changes such as hair turning white, wrinkles appearing, motions becoming slower, memories fading away and children getting married (Yan 2001: 7). To him, getting old involves a loss of youthful appearance, deterioration of the body and memory, and changes in life events.

It appears that the loss of youth is associated with the loss of ability, usefulness and social respect to my male informants as they age. As we have seen in chapter two, Mr. Tse told me proudly about still being able to climb three steps of the staircase with one step, as if he is trying to tell me he is not that old yet and is still a very capable person. He has associated physical health with his capabilities. On the other hand, to many old men who still think that they are as capable as before but are not wanted and employed by society only because they are old, growing old drains away the respect and trust they once earned from other people when they were younger.

We probably assume that the loss of beauty and change of physical appearance are the most disastrous things to women as they age, as seen, perhaps, from the consumption of anti-aging products and the popularity of beauty parlors. When we think about that carefully, we may notice that women in their seventies probably do not visit beauty parlors or use skincare products anymore. Why? Is it because they are afraid of being laughed at, or that anti-aging products are already useless once wrinkles appear and they are already identified as old women? I am not interested in discovering the effectiveness of skincare products or marketing targets



of beauty parlors, but I would like to explore whether physical appearance or something else instead is the biggest loss and concern of women as they grow old.

One of the question I asked some of my informants – especially female informants whom I am more familiar with – is whether they admire their young appearance when they took out the pictures they took when they were young. Two female informants told me they think they are still beautiful now. Ms. Tang said,

Sometimes, I take out the pictures I took when I was young. I always told my sons that I was more beautiful than their wives and girlfriends... I was very beautiful! I had four boyfriends and finally chose my present husband... Time won't flow back, but women have different kinds of beauty at different stages. I still think I am beautiful now!

When asked whether she admires the young and beautiful woman in the pictures she took when she was young, Ms. Yung said,

No, I am still quite good looking now! A person's appearance develops from the heart – the first thing is to stay healthy. Stay happy and you will look beautiful! If you always think and worry, you won't look beautiful... Beauty is temporary...

Although most other female informants do not think that they are beautiful anymore, losing a young and beautiful appearance does not necessarily always lead to unhappiness and a feeling of loss, they told me. Ms. Cheung said,

I want to dye my hair, but I prefer to be more natural... I have to admit that I am old. I don't want to be laughed at if I dye my hair... A person will look younger if she is happier. I still love to play and travel with my ex-colleagues... You will be prettier and happier if you do more good deeds – a person's appearance develops from the heart...

However, unlike the previous two informants, it appears that Ms. Cheung has rather contradictory feelings towards her changes in appearance as she grows older. Although she believes that being happy and having a kind heart will make a person young and beautiful just like what Ms. Yung thinks, she wants to dye her hair but is afraid of being laughed at, and thus suggests that she prefers to be more natural. This kind of resistance to an old appearance can perhaps also be seen from eighty-three-



year-old Ms. Siu who wore bright red lip color and a colorful cartoon T-shirt during our interview who was probably trying to hide her real age as much as she can. Covering her real age seems to have increased her self-confidence. In fact, it is probably more common among women in their thirties, forties and fifties to consider being able to make themselves look younger than they really are as a success. Most old women I met did not seem to attempt to make themselves look younger as this informant did.

It appears that among my female informants, appearance is appearance and health is health, unlike male informants who may associate them with their abilities, capabilities, and even social respect. Having an old appearance may make women feel unhappy and unconfident, but they probably will not think they will be thought of as being useless and incapable because of the wrinkles they had on their face. Although men and women regard physical changes differently, women apparently also come across changes and losses that men come across as they age, such as the deterioration of health, loss of memory, feeling of loss of ability and changes in life events. Both men and women appear to suffer from a feeling of loss towards their loss of youth in similar or different ways.

In general, it seems that men and women lose meanings in different ways among my informants – for example, men lose a sense of achievement upon retirement while women lose companionship and financial supports – but male and female informants probably both lose meanings as they age. Some scholars suggested that women are more able to adapt changes and losses associated with aging than men. Hatch (2000 [1999]: 52), for example, writes,

Ruth Barer (1994) argues that women fare better than men in adapting to problems of aging. This is due in part, she says, to the fact that women live longer than men and hence have more time to adjust to their losses. But she also invokes gender role socialization. Barer states that women's

socialization “to domesticity and family responsibilities” benefits them in later life, by affording “greater role continuity in their late life activities and relationships”.

Due to biological differences and different gender roles, men and women seem to change differently as they age and face the changes in different ways as well. If what Barer suggested is true, then women may be able to adapt to changes due to old age better than men although what they lose as they age may be more or less the same.

### **The pursuit of meanings in old age among men and women**

What I have mentioned briefly about Ruth Barer’s ideas on the adaptation to aging is relevant to what I am going to discuss in this section, which is whether men and women differ in finding meanings in old age – in other words, how men and women adapt to aging. Having discussed the loss of meaning among men and women in the last section, I now turn to discuss whether men and women differ in the pursuit of meanings as they age. I will first consider the kinds of activities which they engage in as sources of meaning in their later life, and then try to analyze how men and women differ in their pursuit of meanings in old age as seen from the activities which they choose to engage in and the conversations I had with them.

#### ***Do men and women do different things?***

Although both male and female informants go to community classes and join interest classes, they do engage in different kinds of activities from my observation. In the community center, for example, only men play chess, and those who watch are all men as well. Thus, it always appears a bit awkward when I was watching them play. One old man who was watching even asked me, “Do you know how to play chess too?” as if women never learn how to play chess. Other than chess



playing, table tennis was also exclusive to men in the community center although there were women watching. Women in the community center mostly watch television, read magazines, do exercises with the equipment there, or simply sit there doing nothing as some men do as well. Of course, they also join interest classes, participate in the *karaoke* section twice a week, and join other trips and activities organized by the center.

I have also observed old people in a large public park in Hong Kong and a small park near a residential area where people who live there are quite well-off. In the small park, only old women can be found. Two different groups of five to eight old women occupied each of the only two long benches there. From what an old woman in the group I joined told me, the two groups do not talk to each other since members of the other group is younger than they are and talk about “different things”. In my group, some old women go to the small park and chat twice a day. They spend quite a lot of time there in the morning and in the afternoon. They mostly talked about health – such as a friend who suffers from heart problems, someone who passed away due to illnesses leaving a lonely spouse behind, or their own suffering of insomnia – and their daily life, such as what to buy from the market nearby.

Men in the larger park, however, do not form groups as such. Some may join in groups of three to four or talk to someone they know when they meet each other, but men mostly go there alone and engage in more individualistic activities such as reading newspaper, taking naps, listening to the radio, exercising, or simply sitting on benches and looking around. The only major group activity is chess playing, which is again an activity which is exclusive to men. Most of them play and watch at the area designated for such purpose, with metal chessboards affixed

on several tables, while others bring their own chessboards with them and play in other areas. In fact, it has been reported that many old people engage in chess gambling in parks (The Sun 2002). I noticed is that there were much more old men than old women in this larger park I went to. Perhaps it is because it is not appropriate for women to wander around in public parks as such, or because women are afraid of the danger they may encounter in a large and public park where robbers, street sleepers and all kinds of people can stay.

In my research, I have observed and participated in an English class organized by the community center for several weeks, and the computer class organized by the computer organization for about ten months. The English class was an intermediate vocabulary class which consisted of less than twenty students, with a male instructor in his mid-sixties who has been teaching for his whole life. There was only one male student in the class. In the computer classes, the number of students varies from less than ten for an advanced class to about thirty for an elementary class. Since I have been joining the same class since they first learned how to turn on the computer until they learn how to create web pages, the number of students decreased as more difficult things are being taught. There were more female students than male students in the elementary classes when things such as the basic operation of the computer and the use of the Internet and e-mails were taught. However, female students reduced in number when more advanced knowledge such as creating a homepage were taught.

It can be seen that some activities appear gender-specific, such that chess playing, table tennis and computer learning appear to be male-oriented activities, while things like chatting in groups, flower arranging and mahjong are more female-oriented activities.



### *Attaining achievement versus maintaining and constructing relationships*

Explaining how men and women differ in the pursuit of meanings by dividing their activities into men's activities and women's activities may have oversimplified the issue. In many cases, male informants engage in certain activities because they want to gain and achieve something, but female informants aim at maintaining better relationships with people, which in fact, also indicate one of their most important sources of meanings in life.

Take reading newspapers for example, which is one of the most important activities in their daily life among some of my male informants. Female informants seem to consider reading newspapers and magazines as a routine activity or a leisure activity to kill time, but male informants take it as an important opportunity to learn more. One male informant said,

I don't have much time for further learning, so I always have to upgrade myself, such as reading newspapers. I read four newspapers...and they are really very useful for me. Although I couldn't learn from books [at school], I learn a lot from newspapers, and thus fulfil myself... People think I am very knowledgeable, in fact, I read them from newspapers, study and follow them, and then they become my own. No matter if it's science, or other academic things, I will then have some basic knowledge...

Another male informant also told me he reads a few newspapers in order to absorb more information and knowledge. A third male informant, Mr. Au, who enjoys reporting news twice a week at the community center to those who are illiterate or have poor eyesight told me that he reads a lot and love to go to the newly-established Central Library and movie information center near the community center very much in order to absorb more knowledge. A fourth male informant told me that he reads two or three newspapers every day and has insufficient time for that, as he has to learn and practice Mandarin and computer as well. No similar remarks can be found during the conversations with my female

informants. None of them mentioned reading newspaper as part of their regular activity when asked what they usually do now, even though I believe that those with good eyesight also read a newspaper every day. It appears that male informants, unlike female informants, have taken newspaper reading as something important in their later life – as a way to gain more knowledge and as part of their personal achievement.

While computer learning provides a sense of achievement among many of my informants, it may serve as a mean to maintain human relationships for some female students. Some female students told me that they have children studying overseas. Once they succeeded in sending emails to their children after the elementary classes, most of them quit. It seems that computer learning has become a tool for these mothers to maintain the relationship with their children, such as Ms. Tang whom I discussed in chapter three.

In a way, the computer and the Internet help to reduce the gap between the old people and their children – the use of the computer and the Internet is no longer something which belongs to the younger generations. One newspaper article titled “Learning Computer Can Narrow the Generation Gap” wrote,

As information technology advances rapidly every day, the “digital divide” can exist between parents and children easily. It even challenges parents’ authority... Since young people grabs information earlier than their parents do through the Internet, it threatens parents’ role of providing information and judgement in the past (Hong Kong Daily News 2001a).

The newspaper article was trying to suggest that learning computer can eliminate the digital divide between parents and children, help parents to regain their authority and parental role, and thus reduce the generation gap between parents and children. However, whether the computer can really help to reduce the gap and



develop a better relationship between parents and children is still a question among many of my informants. Consider what two female informants told me:

I have a computer at home but my children won't let me use it! They are afraid I might misuse or damage it... Maybe they will let me use it after I have attended the computer courses and have some basic knowledge of it...

My children are not patient in teaching me how to use the computer, unlike you. They will say, "You're so stupid!"; "Why don't you write that down! You keep on forgetting!" I think it's revenge. I always scolded them and now it's their opportunity!

These mothers want to learn something which their children are spending long hours with every day. However, learning the computer does not seem to have helped in reducing the gap and developing a closer relationship between these informants and their children. From what the above two female informants suggested, it may even worsen their relationships.

It seems that many of the activities which my female informants engage in are also means to maintaining and constructing relationships, such as playing mahjong, chatting in groups in parks, going out for tea with friends and other forms of gatherings. On the other hand, although male informants also meet some of their friends and relatives sometimes, they do not engage in such activities as frequently as women do. Instead, many of them, especially more educated ones, spend more time trying to learn and achieve through attending various kinds of classes, further developing their own interests, reading newspapers, or learning from information centers and libraries as Mr. Au does.

### **How much does gender affect the pursuit of meanings in old age?**

In this chapter, I have discussed the role gender plays as old people age and encounter losses of social roles, youth and other changes in life, as well as the role gender plays in the pursuit of meanings among men and women as they come across

such losses and changes in life. I have suggested that both male and female informants lose meanings as they retire, as their children leave home, and as they grow older and encounter a loss of youth to similar extents but perhaps in different ways. I have also suggested that male and female informants tend to engage in different activities, where male informants tend to pursue meanings in life through self-achievement, while female informants tend to find meanings through maintaining and constructing relationships with family and friends.

These are conclusions which I have attempted to draw and generalize from my informants and old people whom I have observed and talked to. There are, of course, exceptions, and some informants do not fit closely into what I have suggested. One founder of the organization who is in his eighties, for example, started learning about the computer because he wanted to communicate with his son in Australia through email. It was the same driving force as those mothers I mentioned earlier that made him start to learn the computer. Ms. Yung, who mentioned to me several times about the best employee award she received from the Hospital Authority and the respect and trust she gained from her colleagues (in addition to the friendship and love she has always treasured in life), sees her achievement at work as something really significant in life, just like the other old men whom I have discussed. There are, of course, a few other exceptions and different situations among different old people. Gender is probably only one of the many factors which affects how old people pursue meanings in life. Other things such as health, financial status and religion – which I am going to discuss in the following chapters – also affect how old people find life meanings. Despite all these objective factors, how one pursues meanings in life is also a matter of personal choice. Personality, values, life experiences, what a person treasures most in life



and so on affect how one thinks and chooses as he or she confronts old age. After all, they are individuals. By saying this, I am not trying to conclude that the whole issue concerning old age and the pursuit of meanings in old age can simply be reduced to individual choices and feelings. Nevertheless, objective factors like gender, health, financial status, religion and social status influence a person's values and thus how he or she chooses during the aging process.

## CHAPTER 5      HEALTH AND THE PURSUIT OF MEANINGS IN OLD AGE

Health is one of the most important factors which determines whether an old person's life is happy and meaningful or not. There is probably a greater opportunity that an old person who suffers from body pains and illnesses or cannot walk, see or hear well will find life less meaningful and satisfactory than a healthy old person. Kaufman (1986: 108) writes, "In late life, health is a key factor that can impinge on the range of choices available on the individual and, hence, on the meaning drawn from daily activity". Poor health can affect old people's social life and relationships, pursuit of meaningful activities and sense of worthiness. For instance, an old person who cannot hear well may feel that he or she does not have the ability to participate in interest classes, not to mention being a voluntary worker; an old person who cannot walk well may be unable to join her friends' gathering in parks; and an old person's children may develop feelings of annoyance towards their sick parent who always has to be taken care of.

Recent research by a local organization, the Suicide Prevention Services (formerly known as The Samaritans), found that an old person in Hong Kong committed suicide every thirty-two hours last year, which is the second highest in Asia – "...two hundred and seventy senior citizens aged above sixty committed suicide last year, which occupies twenty seven percent of all suicides..."<sup>18</sup> Over forty percent of the causes to elderly suicides were related to health, such as patients with long-term illnesses..." (Hong Kong Daily News 2002h). The research suggests that deterioration of vision and hearing, long-term illnesses, divorce, lack of financial

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<sup>18</sup> The research initiated by The Samaritans earlier indicated that elderly suicides occupy 28% of all suicides in Hong Kong in 1995, 50% in Singapore in 1994, 38% in China (Beijing, rural) in 1994, 20% in America in 1991, 16% in Australia in 1994, 13% in China (Beijing, urban) in 1994, and 12% in New Zealand in 1993 (Chi, et al. 1997: 2).



power, involvement in court cases and being cheated of money will induce stress in old people and thus increase their tendency to commit suicide (Hong Kong Daily News 2002h). If what this research suggests is true, poor health becomes the major reason why old people find life meaningless and decide to kill themselves, along with other problems they might come across in life, or other possible things caused by poor health as mentioned in the last paragraph. Another report which investigates elderly suicide cases in 1992 found out that “[o]nly 3% of the cases were free from any disease”, while 22% suffered from terminal illnesses and 60% suffered from severe illnesses (Chi, et al. 1997: 21-22), although poor health may not be the major or only reason among all suicide cases.

Po Leung Kuk, one of the largest charity organizations in Hong Kong, did a survey on 1,579 old people from eleven of its elderly service units on their tendency towards depression. The survey suggests that “...nearly twenty percent of the respondents have a tendency towards depression, of which unhealthy senior citizens’ [tendency towards depression] is two times higher than that of healthy ones. The survey also found out that tendency towards depression is closely related to elderly suicide. ...Thirty-four percent of the senior citizens in daycare centers with poor health have a tendency towards depression...” (Hong Kong Daily News 2002e). The research indicates that being unhealthy, especially for a prolonged period of time, can create depression among old people, and steal away their happiness and sense of worth in life, which can lead to suicide.

Many scholars have stated the close relationship between health and life satisfaction in old age. Leung and Lo (1997: 43), for example, suggest that “...the life satisfaction of the elderly had a direct correlation with the presence of illness and functional impairment”. Chi and Lee (1989: 1) write, “Health is one of the

major factors, perhaps the most important factor, to determine...successful ageing. In the past few years, many studies conducted overseas repeatedly illustrated that there [is] a strong relationship among elderly's health and morale or life satisfaction".

Cockerham (1997 [1991]) discusses how poor health may affect old people's lives. He suggests that

The single most important determinant of the quality of an elderly person's life is health. Older people who are unhealthy lead relatively shorter and less satisfactory lives than older people who are healthy, feel good, and have the physical capability to pursue their chosen activities. Especially among elderly, health matters affect all other areas of life, including social roles (1997 [1991]: 74).

As suggested by these scholars, there is a close relationship between health and old people's life satisfaction and quality of life. Thus, health also constitutes an important factor to determine whether an old person finds life happy and meaningful or not. In this chapter, I will discuss what health means to old people and how health conditions may affect the pursuit of meanings in old age. If health really affect the pursuit of meanings in old age, why do some healthy old people fail to find meanings in life while some unhealthy old people succeed in finding meanings in life? How much does health really matter in the pursuit of meanings in old age? Let me begin by looking at the health conditions of old people in Hong Kong.

### **The health condition and self-perceived health condition of old people in Hong Kong**

Studies have indicated that rheumatism and high blood pressure are rather prevalent among old people in Hong Kong, followed by problems with their internal



organs and bones<sup>19</sup> (Leung and Lo 1997: 49; Ho and Woo 1994: 32; Chi and Lee 1989: 21). In a survey conducted in 1994 among more than two thousand old people in Hong Kong, 26.6% of the respondents suggested that they have poor hearing and 55.1% suggested that they have poor eyesight (Leung and Lo 1997: 49).

Deterioration of the body occurs in all old people to different extents. But how does health deterioration affect their pursuit of meaning in their lives? It seems that the most prevalent illnesses, such as rheumatism, high blood pressure and diabetes, do not necessarily affect old people's daily activities, such that less serious sufferers may still be able to engage in meaningful activities as some of my informants do. The research conducted by Chi and Lee of over one thousand Hong Kong old people indicates that 43.6% of respondents need help with heavy housework; 15.4% need help in using public transportation; 12.5% need help in visiting friends and neighbors; while 12.4% need help getting outside (Chi and Lee 1989: 23). Being unable to go out and use public transportation by themselves can hinder old people from the pursuit of important meanings through meeting friends and relatives and engaging in activities such as attending interest classes.

The statistics seem to indicate that a large number of old people are still healthy enough to engage in meaningful activities. However, as suggested earlier in the chapter, long-term illnesses and deterioration of vision and hearing may induce

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<sup>19</sup> In a survey done by the University of Hong Kong, Rotary Club of Hong Kong Northwest, and the Hong Kong Society for the Aged among 1,912 old people, 34.2% of the respondents suffer from rheumatism, 32.2% suffer from hypertension, 17.1% suffer from fractures, 13.5% suffer from peptic ulcers, 10.7% suffer from diabetes mellitus, while 8.2% suffer from chronic bronchitis (Leung and Lo 1997: 49). Ho and Woo's (1994: 32) research on 2,032 old people shows similar findings – 35.9% of the respondents suffer from arthritis; 31.6% suffer from hypertension, 18.0% suffer from cardiac diseases, 16.2% suffer from peptic ulcers, 15.1% suffer from old fractures, 10.3% suffer from diabetes mellitus, while 8.1% suffer from chronic bronchitis or emphysema. Chi and Lee's (1989:21) earlier survey among 1,172 old people indicates that 53.5% of the respondents suffer from rheumatism or arthritis troubles, 25.3% suffer from high blood pressure, 18% suffer from gastrointestinal, 9.9% suffer from lung diseases or asthma, 9.5% suffer from heart diseases, 8.9% suffer from chronic skin troubles, while 8.5% suffer from diabetes.



stress on old people, which may thus increase their tendency to commit suicide, whether they still have the ability to attend interest classes, visit friends and relatives, or engage in other meaningful activities or not. Old people who feel really depressed about their poor health and long-term illnesses and pain probably do not care about learning how to use the computer or chatting freely with their friends in parks. If a large number of old people suffer from rheumatism, high blood pressure and deterioration of hearing and eye sight as mentioned in the last paragraph, many of these old people may still find life unhappy and meaningless even though they have the physical ability to pursue meaningful activities.

On the other hand, figures showing the health status of old people may not be so important. Instead, whether old people themselves think that they are healthy or not maybe a more important and accurate measurement in judging the pursuit of meaning in old age. Ho and Woo (1994: 18) suggest that “Self-perceived health, to a large extent, incorporates functional, physiological and emotional health factors and probably holds a broad frame of reference in gauging the overall health”. Chi and Lee (1989: 52) write, “Self-rated health is found a much stronger predictor of life satisfaction. In other words, this self-evaluated health variable is a more valid predictor than the physician-rated health in predicting one’s life satisfaction”. Cockerham (1997 [1991]: 74-75) also suggests that “The key difference turns out to be the perception of one’s health. Although money, self-esteem, and other factors are important, what really seems to matter the most is how the elderly person perceives his or her health. Those elderly who believe themselves to be healthy for their age are clearly the happiest among older persons”. What these scholars are also trying to suggest is probably that if an old man thinks he is healthier than he actually is, he probably feels happier than might be expected, given his objective



condition. His actual health condition then becomes a less important measure in determining whether he feels happy and meaningful or not. Leung and Lo (1997: 47) suggest that over half of the respondents in their research among Hong Kong old people graded their health condition as average, 31.8% considered their health condition as good, while 15.8% considered their health condition as poor. In Chi and Lee's (1989: 20) research, however, more respondents (26.8%) think that they have poor health.

### **Health and the pursuit of meanings in old age**

Having discussed briefly the health conditions of old people in Hong Kong and the importance of self-perceived health as a measurement of health conditions, I will now discuss in greater depth the relationship between health and the pursuit of meanings in old age in this section, using my informants as illustrations.

#### ***Maintaining good health as a source of meaning***

In fact, many of my informants regard health as something very important to them in their old age. One of the major topics among the old women who went to the small park every day was concerned about health. Many of my informants practice *qigong*, *Tai Chi* and other similar kinds of exercises in order to maintain good health. Maintaining good health becomes an important agenda among many of my informants as they age and as problems started to occur in their bodies. Many of them told me about their fear of having to be taken care of and becoming burdens to their children and other people as they grow older. Ms. Tang, for example, told me,

Health is very important! If you're busy, someone can help; but if you feel pain, no one can [help you with your pain]...

Longevity is not important. The important thing is to stay healthy. I'm afraid of being bedridden, begging someone for a cup of tea; I'm afraid of

having to sit on a wheelchair. Longevity has to be accompanied by good health and wealth... It's meaningless if you have long life but have poor health...

Ms. Tang regards health as something very important to her at present, which is why she engages in many activities related to health. Apart from attending the computer class once a week, she occupies much of her time learning and practicing various kinds of *qigong* and other things related to health. She told me that she is learning all these now because of her own health problems – such as a decrease in bone density, backbone problems, liver problems and other problems related to menopause – as well as her husband's. Engaging in health-related activities seems to have become an important source of meaning in her life, and being able to maintain good health becomes a kind of achievement to her to a certain extent. In fact, after she has learned how to use the Internet through the computer class, she told me that she often browses through web sites related to *qigong*. She tries to grab every chance in which she can be able to learn more about maintaining good health.

Several other informants expressed their anxiety of having to be taken care of in their later lives. Mr. Au, for example, said,

There was a time when my stomach wasn't good and I didn't know how long I could still live. I was worried that my poor health would be a burden to my children. Once your health is bad, you need the younger ones to take care of you. But later on, someone introduced *Tai Chi* to me and after that, for six to seven years, nothing [bad] happened to my body anymore! So, I think the most important thing is to keep on exercising, so that I can reduce and eliminate the worries I have on my body...

Ms. Cheung, who has never gotten married and does not have any children, told me that she is afraid of having more and more illnesses. She would rather die earlier if she has any serious illnesses. She also expressed that she does not want to suffer from poor health or become a burden to anyone as some of her relatives are.



Mr. Tse thinks that health is one of the most important things to him now. He thinks he can continue to live happily if he stays healthy. When I interviewed him, he told me that he has just watched a TV program about cancer recently, and thinks that it will be very troublesome being unhealthy. If he has any serious illnesses later on in his life, he told me that he would “make himself disappear”, which either means that he would not let his family find him or he would commit suicide. Instead of thinking that serious illnesses like cancer would bring him pain and suffering, he probably thinks that having serious illnesses would create trouble to his son and other people. He told me that he does not want to be a burden to his son – if he knows that he is going to die, he said, “I would dig a cave and hide myself”.

Other informants also suggested that they would love to live longer if they can stay healthy. Mr. Lee said,

Is longevity good? If I don't have to trouble other people – yes! If I do have to trouble other people – no! ...If [I] have to trouble someone, perhaps one hundred and twenty years old is good enough. If I don't have to trouble anyone, even three hundred and fifty years old is great<sup>20</sup>! ...If I really have to trouble someone one day, what shall I do? ...The only thing that I can do is to be careful now – live a normal life and hope that I won't have to trouble someone...

When asked how long he wants to live, Mr. Chu replied,

Me? Two hundred years old<sup>20</sup>. That's not too much. If I reach two hundred years old and I can be like now – teach English and play tennis sometimes – that would be great. But it wouldn't be like this. When you reach that age, you can't speak and eat properly... I would then prefer to die earlier because that would be meaningless. Even your family and relatives will feel unhappy and meaningless seeing you like that. If I stay healthy, I can play tennis and teach people English and that can still be regarded as a happy thing...

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<sup>20</sup> Of course, no one ever lives as long as Mr. Lee and Mr. Chu have suggested. They are not being realistic. Their exaggeration probably indicates their hopes to live and enjoy life as long as possible if they can remain healthy and do anything they want. Mr. Chu, for example, thinks that life is really too short for him if he has to die within the next two or three decades. He thinks that he has not achieved enough in life yet.



...Those things [bad health and illnesses] come all of a sudden. Now, I have diabetes and can't hear well. How can I know when those things will appear? Once they appear, maybe the doctor will cut your leg off! Then, I can no longer play tennis and walk here to teach. Life would be meaningless then.

Possessing good health thus becomes very important to many of my informants in old age. Some of them would rather die if they have poor health, whether because they have to suffer from illnesses, have to be taken care of by others, or both<sup>21</sup>. As Cockerham (1997 [1991]: 99) writes, "Longevity may produce greater concerns about becoming senile or contracting some other incurable health problems, such as cancer or heart disease, in which the individual is relatively helpless and the financial cost is great". Lachman et al. (1994: 217) gave similar comments about prolonged life in America, "Although Americans are optimistic that scientific research will lead to increased longevity, they fear losing their personal independence. Two-thirds of the respondents said they wanted to see their 100th birthdays, but 75% said they worry about losing control of their lives. Nearly 80% said they fear ending up in a nursing home more than dying a quick death from a sudden disease."

Not only that possessing good health is important, but maintaining good health has even become a kind of achievement to some of my informants, such that being able to maintain their health condition is a source of meaning in itself and encourages them to continue engaging in health-related activities. To many of my informants, good health may appear to be a basic criterion in life even though they understand that health deteriorates as one ages. Losing this basic criterion will thus make life meaningless to them.

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<sup>21</sup> The research initiated by Befrienders International on elderly suicides in Hong Kong discovered that "[a]ll the cases of attempted suicide testified to a feeling of worthlessness and not wanting to be a burden on those who looked after them" (Chi et al. 1997: vi).



### *The relationship of poor health to the pursuit of meanings in old age*

I have discussed in the previous section the importance of health in old people's lives and their worries of having to be taken care of when they get older and older if their health further deteriorates – some of them expressed that they would rather die if it happens. I have also mentioned at the beginning of the chapter that health is one of the most important factors in determining whether an old person can lead a happy late life or not. Since health is such an important issue in old people's lives, how has health actually affected the pursuit of meanings in old age? Let us first consider old people with poor health conditions.

Deteriorating health does make some of my informants unhappy and discourage them from pursuing meaningful activities. Mr. Wu, for example, told me that he has poor vision which restrains him from many activities he wants to participate in. Although he spends most of the day in the community center and the park near where he lives, he told me that he actually wants to learn something new, such as the computer. However, his poor vision discourages him from learning things, which can probably remove him from loneliness after his children have grown up and his wife passed away ten years ago.

Poor health discourages Ms. Yuen from learning things as well and makes her feel unhappy. She said, "I can't see well and I can't walk well... I want to learn things but I am not healthy and so I don't have the mood to learn... I feel old when my eyes feel tired and can't see clearly... I started going to the hospital frequently three years ago... Being old is not a good thing..."

As we have seen in chapter three, illnesses not only grab away Mr. Kwan's opportunity in pursuing meaningful activities, but also take away his confidence and self-esteem as well. He had a stroke five years ago and has to sit on a wheelchair



since then. He talked happily about the time when he was working in a floral shop, designing bunches of flowers which cost more than a thousand dollars, but then told me sadly that he cannot make any of those anymore now that his hands are shaking after he had a stroke. He laughed at himself sarcastically that he used to talk in a gentlemanly way, but is unable to speak clearly and nicely anymore.

Among my informants, Ms. Fong is probably the most unhappy and pessimistic. She fails to find any meanings and happiness in life and wants to die as soon as possible. She told me at the very beginning of the interview that she is not happy because she has bad legs and diabetes and so she cannot go anywhere. She thinks that she will be happy if she is healthy, so that she can travel somewhere. Like Ms. Yuen, having poor health makes her feel that getting old is a really bad thing.

Poor health indeed makes these old people unhappy and discourages them from pursuing meaningful activities. Many of them tend to think that they are useless and incapable of pursuing meaningful activities, such as learning new things and travelling, now that they cannot see, walk or hear properly. Whether they are really incapable or not, having poor health conditions lowers these old people's confidence and self-esteem and discourages them from pursuing meaningful activities. Poor health not only prevents them from finding meanings in life, but also grabs away the meanings they once had as well, such as Mr. Kwan who used to find meanings in his work in the floral shop before he had a stroke. As health deteriorates and illnesses appear as they age, some old people lose meanings in life.

Baumeister (1991) discusses the relationship between pain and meaning:

The most important relationship between pain and meaning...is pain's ability to strip away the broader, meaningful aspects of the world. Pain *deconstructs* the world, focusing attention intensely on the here and now... In an important sense, pain stops the world. It interrupts the flow of existence of



the complex self in the meaningful world. Subjectively, the world seems to shrink to the immediate surroundings, and the self shrinks to the body (1991: 236).

Chronic pain confronts individual[s] with a difficult problem, and often this problem appears to them as a lack or loss of meaning... Sufferers from chronic pain desperately, eagerly desire some diagnosis that can explain their pain... Yet, culture offers few guidelines... The result is the loss of a meaningful, predictable, orderly, understandable world, and this loss increases the difficulty of coping with chronic pain (1991: 238).

Although body pains lead to a loss of meanings in life, Mr. Wu's suggestion that he would love to learn the computer if he had good vision and Ms. Fong's suggestion that she could travel somewhere if she were healthy seem to hint at their hopes to become healthier and pursue a more happy and meaningful life. Hopes and goals can be important sources of meanings. However, most of my unhealthy informants, including Mr. Wu and Ms. Fong, did not seem to think that they would ever really get well. They seem to think of deteriorating health as a matter of life in old age – something that they cannot do anything about. Ms. Fong, for example, suggested, "Being old means being useless... Being old is unhappy because you become unhealthy...". To her, being unhealthy and unhappy seems to be a matter of life as one grows old. Most of my informants also seem to feel rather helpless towards deteriorating health. Medical advances only seem to have extended their lives, or even the time for suffering, but they cannot eliminate their pains and illnesses.

Although poor health negatively affects the pursuit of meanings among some of my informants, some unhealthy old people still manage to find meanings in life.

When I went to the computer class for the first time, I noticed that an old man's right hand was shaking a lot to the extent that he had much difficulty clicking the correct icons and links on the monitor and web pages with the mouse. I considered that as a rather big obstacle in learning how to use the computer.



Sometimes, it would take him longer time to complete the tasks and steps told by the instructor, given that he understands better than some other students. The instructor seldom waited until everyone had finished before he continued, not to mention that the old man was trying to jot notes at the same time. However, this did not seem to discourage him from continuing to learn. He turned out to be one of the most eager to learn among all students. I can see that he does not attend the classes only because he wants to kill time or learn some basic knowledge about the computer and Internet as some students do. In fact, he was still learning about the computer enthusiastically the last time I went to the computer class.

Poor health conditions may indeed hinder old people from pursuing meaningful activities, such as Mr. Kwan who had a stroke and has to rely on a wheelchair since then, or Mr. Wu who has difficulty seeing things although he wants to learn how to use the computer. On the other hand, for old people with better health conditions, self-perceived health as discussed earlier may apply. Old people like Ms. Yuen who claims that she cannot walk and see well but visit the community center every day will probably be able to attend interest classes to learn how to sing, arrange flowers, draw and so on. The problem is that she perceived herself as being not healthy enough to learn.

On the other hand, some unhealthy old people perceive themselves as being healthy, or feel optimistic about life even though they know that they are not, and are willing to pursue meanings in old age – like the old man who learns the computer with his hands shaking. Mr. Chu, for example, probably perceives himself as being rather healthy although he is wearing a hearing aid and has diabetes. I always had to repeat what I said during our conversations. Nonetheless, he plays tennis several times a week, teaches English at the community center, and wants to



look for some more voluntary work. In a way, old people's self-perceived health and life attitudes can be rather important in determining whether they can find a happy and meaningful life, especially among old people without serious illnesses which affect daily activities.

### ***The relationship of good health to the pursuit of meanings in old age***

I have discussed how poor health has or has not affected the pursuit of meanings in old age. What about healthy old people? From my observation, it is in fact quite true that those who attend the computer and English classes, join gatherings with friends in parks, play chess in parks, act as voluntary workers and pursue other meaningful activities include more healthy than unhealthy old people. Some of them may need a staff to support their bodies, while a few others cannot see or hear very well. Yet, most of them appear quite healthy at least from the outside. The unhealthy ones are those who just sit in the community center all day and talk to people occasionally, or those who use the equipment there to exercise their bodies sometimes, like Mr. Kwan and Ms. Yuen whom I met there.

Having said that most old people who engage in meaningful activities are healthier old people, not all healthy old people find life happy and meaningful. Just as gender is only one factor which affects the pursuit of meanings in old age as discussed in the previous chapter, health is also only one other factor which determines whether an old person finds life happy and meaningful or not, especially among old people who are not seriously ill. Other things such as poverty, loss of social roles, and relationships with people can make old people feel unhappy about life. Psychological barriers can also hinder old people from pursuing meanings in life – some old people may feel that they are old and are thus worthless in society, or that it is useless for old people to learn and achieve anything. Health alone probably

does not determine whether an old person's life is happy and meaningful or not, especially among healthier old people who do not have to suffer from severe body pains and illnesses.

Take Mr. Chu as an example. The use of hearing aid and having diabetes do not seem to make him feel that he is unhealthy, and probably do not bring him much unhappiness at all. He keeps on playing tennis and acting as a voluntary worker regularly as if he is in perfect health. However, other things in life make him find life unhappy, such as poverty (which has been discussed in chapter two), retirement, family and his own bad experiences in life:

Some people have lots of money, but they don't help their brothers and sisters. I have brothers and sisters who have tens of millions of dollars. I am so poor and they are reluctant to help. Yet, they feel that they are right... My sister loved me when I was small and now she doesn't help me...

There are many frustrating things, but you can't say a word about it. The world is so unfair...

Throughout our conversations, Mr. Chu mentioned many unpleasant experiences in his life, but his health condition does not seem to be a cause to his unhappiness at all. Instead, it was other bad experiences and difficulties in life which made Mr. Chu find life unhappy and meaningless. Health is only one of the many factors which determines whether old people find life happy and meaningful or not. Good health does not always lead to happiness and meaningfulness, just as poor health does not always lead to a meaningless life.

### ***The Relationship between physical health, mental health, and the meanings of life in old age***

So far, I have discussed the relationship of physical health to the pursuit of meanings in old age. However, health means more than physical health alone. Chi and Lee (1989: 1) write,



Generally speaking, health is defined by most dictionaries as the state of being well, without disease. In other words, health is normally understood as freedom from illness or disease. Such definition, on closer scrutiny in modern times, is considered problematic, single dimensioned, narrow and negative because it only implies that health exists in the absence of illness and disease. The concept of health has been redefined positively by the World Health Organization as ‘a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or illness’.

According to Chi and Lee, health should also include mental and social well-being. Dementia and depression, for example, obviously affect the pursuit of meanings in life among old people, of which the latter is closely related to elderly suicide in Hong Kong as discussed in the beginning of the chapter. Although I have difficulty knowing the mental health conditions of my informants within just a few hours of conversation, I can discern from the interviews whether they have positive attitudes towards life, feel depressed, or have senses of loss in life, which constitute important parts of mental health. As Cockerham (1997 [1991]: 99) suggests, “Losses in late life can cause older people to expend large amounts of emotional and physical energy in grieving and resolving grief; therefore, it is not surprising that depressive disorders are the primary mental health affliction of the old”.

Mental health affects the pursuit of meanings and happiness in old age. Ms. Fong, for example, who spends the whole day sitting in front of the television set in the community center, told me how unhappy she feels throughout our conversations. She kept on telling me how tough and unhappy her life is – her health is poor; her friends seldom contact her; her husband gambles a lot and she hates him; her children never visit her; and so on. I consider her as having a rather negative attitude towards life and as being depressed, since she also told me she wants to die as soon as possible. Her poor mental health leads her to avoid the pursuit of meaningful activities and developing relationships with other people except the social workers at the community center. Losses in old age and bad experiences in



life make her feel depressed and disappointed. I am almost certain that if her life had been happier and she had had more positive life attitudes, her life would have been totally different. Apart from the case of Ms. Fong, some other old people also told me that they are old and useless and are thus reluctant to learn something new or attend interest classes.

Although none of my informants suffer from mental illnesses such as senile dementia, the fear of it may affect old people's mental well-being as well. Kleinfield (2002: 1, 8) writes,

It is often assumed that death is the great bogeyman of the elderly, what they dread above all else, but now that people live much longer and have greater expectations for their old age, the complexion of their worries has changed. Many elderly people say that what they fear more than death and scourges like cancer is losing their minds, a debasing death of its own sorts.

People fear [Alzheimer's disease, the dominant cause of dementia,] more than death, because it steals your personality and turns you into somebody that requires total care...

"According to the World Health Organization, about 37 million people worldwide have dementia. About 5 percent of men and 6 percent of women over 60 are affected by Alzheimer's" (Kleinfield 2002: 8). In Hong Kong, about four percent of old people over sixty-five suffer from dementia (Chiu 1998: 1002-1009). My informants did not mention about their fear of senile dementia. One explanation for this is that I did not ask about it. Another possible explanation is that many old people in Hong Kong are ignorant about senile dementia. A third explanation is that they are not afraid of it, which is why they have not mentioned about it when I discussed topics like growing old and longevity with them during the interviews. Nonetheless, some of them mentioned not wanting to be taken care of by others and becoming burdens on others, which probably also suggest something more than having poor physical health alone. Mr. Au mentioned about keeping the brain active,



“If you don’t learn and use your brain, you will become old and weak very easily. So, I must make sure that I learn...that I go to the library to read books in fields I like. I also collect stamps. I have collected stamps from over two hundred countries...”. In a way, Mr. Au was trying to suggest how he could keep himself mentally healthy, although he had not indicated his fear towards afflictions like senile dementia throughout our conversations.

Mental health affects the pursuit of meaning in old age. Nevertheless, there is probably also a rather close relationship between physical health and mental health. Poor physical health can make old people feel unhappy, depressed and discouraged as we have seen. Kaufman (1986: 105) writes,

...chronic health problems or a general feeling of weakness or fatigue prevents [old people] from being as active as they once were and would still like to be. Their physical health limits their daily routine and choice of activities, and this causes varying degrees of frustration... Those whose health restricts them from doing what they would like, or as much as they would like, are somewhat frustrated and feel the days are ‘empty’, ‘too long’, or ‘no good’.

Dunkle et al. (2001) write,

Most worries were related to health and function. The most frequent concerns [of old people] were related to falls, not enough energy, forgetting things, ability to get around, and health in general... Clearly, health and impaired physical abilities presented the very old with chronic worries (81-82).

...the most frequent worries experienced were poor physical health and factors that impaired mobility and the ability to perform daily activities. These worries were probably not new and may have already significantly influenced the very old respondents’ perception of themselves and their abilities to meet these challenging situations (103).

I have suggested in the beginning of the chapter that poor health can cause depression among old people. In fact, physical health affects the mental health of some of my informants. Consider again the case of Ms. Yuen. She said, “I can’t see well and I can’t walk well... I want to learn things but I am not healthy and so I



don't have the mood to learn... I feel old when my eyes feel tired and can't see clearly... I started going to the hospital frequently three years ago... Being old is not a good thing..." Deteriorating health affects her "mood" and the perception of herself and her abilities to pursue meaningful activities. Being unable to walk and see well make her feel that she is not capable of learning new things. These worries about health have probably preoccupied Ms. Yuen's life.

Conversely, how she perceives herself seems to have further decreased her physical health and ability. Since she has a poor perception of herself and her abilities, she continues to think of herself as being physically weak and unhealthy, and refrains from engaging in meaningful activities which would probably make her perceive herself as being physically healthier, or really make her become physically healthier.

Zarb (1993) discusses the interrelationship between physical and mental health. He writes of the old people in his study,

Several...emphasized that their physical and emotional well-being were inextricably linked... This can become a vicious circle; the drain on their emotional reserves meant that they felt less able to cope physically which, in turn, contributed to a further drain on both their emotional and physical resources (1993: 39).

I have suggested earlier that most old people who pursue meaningful activities are healthy old people, while most unhealthy old people spend most of their time sitting in community centers all day, watching TV and talking to people occasionally from my observation. However, apart from their objective physical health conditions, is it also because they perceive themselves as being physically unhealthy and incapable of doing anything meaningful and constructive that they have looked and gradually "become" more and more unhealthy by sitting and watching TV all day? If they thought of themselves as being healthier than how



they think now, would they look as healthy as those old people who attend computer classes, act as voluntary workers, or practice *Tai Chi* every day? I would say that if those old people are not bedridden and do not have to rely on a wheelchair, they probably would indeed be so healthy.

### **How much does health affect the pursuit of meanings in old age?**

In this chapter, I have discussed how health may affect the pursuit of meanings among old people. We have seen from elderly suicide surveys that health is an important factor to determine whether old people find lives happy and meaningful or not. We have also discussed how poor health lowers old people's confidence and self-esteem, and is thus a hindrance to their pursuit of meanings in life. However, why is it that some healthy old people are able to find meanings in life while some do not, and some unhealthy old people fail to find meanings in life while some do? Obviously, health often does not directly determine how meaningful one's life in old age can be.

As suggested earlier, life attitudes, self-perceived health, and experiences in life all affect the pursuit of meanings among old people. For instance, unhealthy old people who perceive themselves as being healthy and have positive life attitudes are probably more able to pursue meanings in life than other unhealthy old people, while healthy old people who have come across many unpleasant experiences in life may find life unhappy and meaningless. These are various factors which affect whether healthy and unhealthy old people are able to find meanings in life. Statistics and measurements alone cannot exactly tell how health may affect the pursuit of meanings as people age. Besides, health does not only mean physical health. Mental health also forms an important part of health and the two

components are interrelated – some old people may feel depressed about their poor health conditions which may in turn worsens their health conditions.

After all, health is both objective and subjective. It is probably harder for old people with serious illnesses to pursue meaningful activities. On the other hand, among old people who are not bedridden, health can be a subjective issue. Baumeister (1991: 213) writes, “The important factor in determining happiness...is not how healthy you are, objectively, but rather how you feel about your health, subjectively”. How healthy old people are can depend on the perception of their own health, which in turns affect their perception of themselves, their capabilities, confidence and self-esteem. If old people think that they are healthy enough to pursue meaningful activities, they will probably be more able to find meanings than those who think they are not healthy enough to do so. Conversely, old people who engage in meaningful activities probably find themselves healthier than those who do not – like those old people who sit inside the community center all day, giving me the impression that they are too unhealthy to pursue meaningful activities.

Having suggested that unhealthy old people do not necessarily find life meaningless and healthy old people do not necessarily find life meaningful, I would say that health, or self-perceived health to be more accurate, is still an important determinant to the pursuit of meanings in old age. It is quite true that among my informants, those who are more able to find meanings in life and engage in meaningful activities are mostly healthy old people (both physically and mentally), while those who tend to find life unhappy and meaningless are mostly unhealthy old people (both physically and mentally). I have not encountered old people who are bedridden in my research, yet it appears that healthy people have a choice but unhealthy ones have much fewer choices. It seems that healthy old people can



decide whether they want to engage in meaningful activities or not, but old people who suffer from illnesses, especially serious illnesses and have to live in hospitals and nursing homes, probably have fewer choices and opportunities than healthy ones. Health is probably an important determinant of meaning especially among old people with serious illnesses. However, among old people with less serious illnesses, health may affect different old people differently, depending on how they perceive their health subjectively.

## **CHAPTER 6      MONEY AND THE PURSUIT OF MEANINGS IN OLD AGE**

In the previous chapter, I have suggested that health is one of the most important factors in determining whether an old person's life is happy and meaningful or not. In this chapter, I am going to suggest that money is another important factor which affects the pursuit of meanings in old age. Money and health in fact affect the pursuit of meanings in life among old people in similar ways – they shape and affect how old people pursue meanings in life, but each of them alone cannot accurately and fully determine whether an old person finds meaning in life or not. Due to the similar nature of these two factors in affecting the pursuit of meanings in old age, the structure of this chapter will be similar to that of the previous chapter.

If poor health is the major cause to elderly suicide in Hong Kong, poverty is perhaps the second. Research conducted by the Center for Suicide Research and Prevention at The University of Hong Kong found out that “not only illnesses...can increase the risks of elderly suicide, but poverty can also make old people feel depressed and easily bring about the thought of suicide” (Hong Kong Daily News 2002c). Recently, an old man committed suicide because he could not afford his daily living and the Social Welfare Department refused to grant him assistance, as suggested in the letter he wrote before he died – “Time Flies. Over sixty years have gone in the blink of an eye. Within that period, there weren't too many obstacles... Recently, I cannot maintain my basic living and seek for assistance from the Social Welfare Department... The Department refused to let me obtain Comprehensive Social Service Assistance and explained to me that the government has to reduce expenses... I would rather die earlier than to seek help from no where...” (Hong Kong Daily News 2002k). We have no idea whether what the old man wrote about



his request for government assistance is totally true or not, but it is probably true that poverty is a direct cause of his suicide, whether because he does not have enough money to maintain his living, or because having to ask for financial assistance hurt his dignity.

Wilson (1993: 63) writes about the importance of money in old age – “Money is of vital importance to successful ageing, even though few elders feel free to say so. In terms of maintaining independence and autonomy, the main contribution made by money is in giving access to a decent standard of living”. It is probably harder for old people to feel happy and meaningful in their lives if their basic needs in life cannot be met, or if they cannot do things they want because they do not have sufficient money for them. Thus, money is an important factor in determining whether old people find meanings in life or not. In this chapter, I will discuss how money affects the pursuit of meanings in old age. How is money linked to subsistence, autonomy and dignity in old age? In relation to money, how do social class and education affect the pursuit of meanings in old age?

### **The Financial Condition of Old People in Hong Kong**

Unlike many old people in some Western countries such as the United States and Japan who receive at least minimal pensions upon retirement, old people in Hong Kong do not, and may suffer from poverty. Apart from government sectors and large companies, most employers offer little or no retirement pensions. Most Hong Kong people receive nothing. The idea of getting insurance and saving money for their later life is new, and the Mandatory Provident Fund scheme<sup>22</sup> was only recently

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<sup>22</sup> The Mandatory Provident Fund system was established in 1998 and came into full operation in December 2000. “Both employers and employees are required to make contributions based on 5% of employees' relevant income, subject to maximum and minimum income levels.... As at the end of March 2003, 93.8 per cent of all employers, 95.7 per cent of all employees and 75.8 per cent of all



released by the government, which requires both employers and employees to save five percent of the employees' salary for their retired life. As a result, many old people today suffer from poverty after they have retired. Chow and Chi (1997: 174) describe the financial condition of Hong Kong old people – "Economically, the elderly in Hong Kong [are] probably among the poorest in the population. Since most of them [are] not receiving any retirement pensions, their only way to maintain a living [is] to rely on their own savings or the support of their children if available". Also they can apply for government assistance. In September 2002, fifty-four percent (over one hundred and forty thousand) of the recipients of Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) were old people (Hong Kong Daily News 2002j), representing almost one-fifth of the overall senior population<sup>23</sup>. Old people can also receive a few hundred dollars' Old Age Allowance<sup>24</sup> from the Social Welfare Department every month without any assessments on personal assets, unlike CSSA.

So, why haven't old people in Hong Kong saved money for their retired life even if they have known that they will have little or no retirement pensions? One explanation is that most old people fail to find a job as the economic situation worsens. Until the last decade, many old people with financial difficulties still engaged in low-paid or part-time jobs. Chow and Chi (1997: 174) write, "In 1991

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self-employed persons have enrolled in MPF schemes. Together with those who have joined other retirement schemes, 84 per cent of Hong Kong's working population are already covered by retirement benefits" (HKSAR 2003).

<sup>23</sup> According to Census and Statistics Department, there were 777,000 old people aged 65 and over in Hong Kong by mid-2002 (Census and Statistics Department 2003).

<sup>24</sup> The Old Age Allowance (OAA) is commonly known as "Fruit Allowance" (生果金) probably due to its nature and small amount, since it is almost only sufficient for old people to buy some fruits for themselves every month and represents the respect, concern and appreciation of the society and the government towards them. An old person aged 65 to 69 can obtain \$625 of Normal Old Age Allowance (NOAA); while an old person aged 70 or above can obtain \$705 of Higher Old Age Allowance (HOAA) from the Social Welfare Department. As of July 2003, 454,953 old people were obtaining OAA, representing about 59% of old people in Hong Kong. NOAA is means-tested while HOAA is not. An old person is eligible for receiving OAA if he or she has resided in Hong Kong for at least five years after reaching the age of 60, is not absent from Hong Kong for more than 180 days a year, and is not imprisoned. Besides, old people receiving CSSA and Disability Allowance cannot apply for OAA (Social Welfare Department 2003a).



about a quarter of the elderly population in Hong Kong were classified as ‘economically active’, implying that they were still being employed. Judging from the meagre incomes that most of them received, it was obvious that the elderly had worked mainly for the reason of maintaining a living.” However, as the economic condition worsens, many jobs which were once performed by old people are now replaced by younger people, such as caretakers in residential buildings and street cleaners, leaving older workers jobless.

Another explanation that I suggest is that many of the old people probably expected their children to support their living when they grew old, just as they had done for their own parents when their parents became old, but the fact is that many children are not supporting their parents nowadays. These old people had not anticipated the situation they are encountering now. They have never thought that their children would not or could not support them when they grow old. This is probably also a reason why poverty is so prevalent among old people in this generation.

Research conducted by the Democratic Party in 2001 found out that forty-seven percent of elderly respondents are not financially supported by their children (Hong Kong Daily News 2001c). A newspaper columnist suggests in an article that many Hong Kong people would rather own a pet and employ a Filipino maid than support their own parents:

Many small families own a pet and employ a Filipino maid, but do not live with [their] parents who gave birth to [them] and nurtured [them]. As old parents, they seldom have contacts with their children. Their identity will be excluded from that of family members; their status is even lower than that of a Filipino maid. Earlier people said, “[My] parents are the ones who gave birth to me”. However, today’s generation would rather own cats, dogs, and Filipino maids than support their parents, which makes us feel really sad (Seung Yan 2002b).

In another article, he writes,



In the past, as the saying goes, “bringing up children can guard against old age, accumulating grain can guard against starvation”. Today, this method is totally ineffective. Sons have their own worlds when they grow up. If the next generation can be self-sufficient, [parents] already feel satisfied. Shall we still expect them to support their parents? (Seung Yan 2002a).

The newspaper columnist’s comments in the second article resemble what some of my informants think. As the economic condition worsens and social values change, many old people understand that they can no longer rely on their children anymore. Some of my informants expressed their hopes about their children being able to support their own life. Others talked about how society has changed since their generation, such that children are no longer obligated to take care of their parents. Ms. Yung said, “Raising your son is your responsibility, but don’t expect your son to support you. So you have to keep something (such as money) for yourself... Everyone is like that now – they will think about how they themselves are going to live [in old age]...”. When asked whether he thinks children do not support their parents nowadays, Mr. Wong, who receives retirement pensions every month, said, “Some children can’t even support their own living! Just like what people say – ‘father bought up the son and the son has to bring up his own son’. We have suffered in our lives, so we know that our parents also had a hard life bringing us up, but young people nowadays don’t think this way anymore...”. Another informant suggested that even young people themselves cannot find a job these days, so how can they be able to take care of their parents? I asked Mr. Lee, whose son and daughter have not gotten married yet, whether he is afraid that they will not take care of and support him after they get married one day. He said,

It will happen someday. So I have already planned about it earlier on, because they also have their own future. Now, if they can give me money...of course I will accept. But if they don’t give me money, I won’t request it. I will only remind them, “You have to prepare for your own future and don’t spend money thoughtlessly.” This is the only thing that I will request them to do. I don’t request them to give me money, but I request



them to prepare for their own future. They have to form their own families, and will have their own expenses...

Nowadays, many young people are not willing to live with their elderly parents. On the other hand, living with elderly parents does not necessarily mean that they are being supported financially. The research conducted by the Society for Community Organization among fifty-four old people living with their family members found out that over half of the respondents were not economically supported by their family members, and “nearly forty percent of the responded old people suggested that they have to use their ‘Fruit Allowance’ [Old Age Allowance] or savings to aid the family’s daily expenses” (Hong Kong Daily News 2001b). Old people who live with their family members are usually not eligible for CSSA, which in turn worsens their financial condition. Therefore, old people who live with their children do not necessarily live financially more affluent lives than old people who do not.

### **Money and the pursuit of meanings in old age**

I have discussed in the last chapter how good health and poor health can affect the pursuit of meanings in old age. Similarly, poverty and wealth can also affect the pursuit of meanings among old people – restraining or enabling them to engage in meaningful activities, and influencing how they perceive themselves and their social values in old age. Money can be as important to old people as health in old age. One informant suggested that longevity is desirable only if one possesses health and money. Let us look at how money affects the pursuit of meanings in old age by using my informants and research results from the government and community organizations as illustrations.

### *The relationship of poverty to the pursuit of meanings in old age*

Most of the old people I met in the elderly community center were poor old people. An informant told me that most of the frequent visitors in the community center live in the public housing estate where the community center is located. Some of them receive CSSA. The community center offers free interest classes and other free activities such as *karaoke*, chess playing and table tennis, as well as meals and local trips at low prices. It appears that visitors who are relatively more well off only visit the community center to join interest classes and use the computer. On the other hand, those who spend most of their day in the community center appear to be the poorest.

Why are poorer old people frequent visitors of the community center? Several informants told me that money is at present their biggest concern, and Ms. Yuen was one of them. It was summer (around thirty degrees Celsius) when I did my research at the community center. Ms. Yuen told me that she always stays at the community center, because she can enjoy free air-conditioning there. She told me that she cannot afford that at home. The electricity charge may be too expensive for her, but I also wonder whether she has an air-conditioner at home at all. I started to think that perhaps other old people stayed at the community center for the whole day for similar reasons, judging from the fact that some of them just sit there and do almost nothing apart from staring at the television set and chatting with other old people occasionally. Visitors can even watch television at the community center to save electricity charges at home and read the free newspapers offered by the community center. Most frequent visitors also have breakfasts, lunches and/or dinners in the center which are charged at relatively low prices. The community center then provides a means for the old people to save some of their daily expenses.



Some of these old people perhaps cannot afford the expenses elsewhere and have nowhere to go except places like parks where they do not have to spend money. Since most frequent visitors live nearby, they can even save transportation expenses.

Indeed, poverty restrains old people from many activities that they would like to engage in. Mr. Chu said,

If I have time and opportunity, I want to learn the computer. But if you learn the computer, you have to buy a computer which costs more than \$10,000. I don't have more than \$10,000 now. So, what's the point of learning? It's useless for me to learn then... I want to learn. I want to learn everything. My handwriting is bad, so I want to learn writing...but it costs a lot – it costs some \$500... My handwriting looks bad, like primary school students'. But if you ask me to pay a few hundred dollars, I won't go for it... If it's less than \$100, I will go for it...

Another informant told me that she meets her friends less frequently now because she does not have extra money for gatherings and transportation. A seventy-five-year-old man Tisdall (1989: 16-18) interviewed in Hong Kong said, "I get seven hundred and eighty-five dollars a month from Social Welfare. You can't play mahjong with welfare money so I never do. I go walking every morning just to pass the time".

Research conducted by Caritas Community Development Service among more than two hundred old people who receive CSSA suggested that "Many senior citizens who receive CSSA have to reduce expenses by reducing social activities. Over ten percent of interviewees suggested that they seldom or never visit their friends and relatives because they have no money. Over twenty percent suggested that they seldom or never join activities that cost money. They cannot even afford going to wedding banquets [to give money to the bride and bridegroom]" (Hong Kong Daily News 2002a). Further research conducted by the same organization listed eight items of daily expenses that the respondents wished to be able to afford (Hong Kong Daily News 2002f). Apart from basic needs like being able to afford to



have three meals a day, visit doctors, buy new clothes and cut their hair, old people also wish that they could afford to travel to visit their relatives and buy them gifts, join activities organized by community centers, and visit their relatives on the mainland once a year (Hong Kong Daily News 2002f).

Thus, poverty affects the social lives of old people significantly. Some cannot even afford to travel by public transportation to meet their friends and relatives, not to mention having a cup of tea with them in restaurants or buying them gifts, which is a custom for visiting someone's home in Hong Kong. Old people lose a source of meaning in life when they cannot afford to join activities like local trips organized by community centers. Yet, we may not be aware that they also lose another source of meaning in life when they cannot even afford to meet their friends and relatives because transportation and gatherings costs money. As a result, many of these old people may not have many choices apart from spending most of their day in community centers and parks near where they live. Their activities have indeed been restrained.

Fontana (1977: 140) describes poverty in old age in this way:

To speak of leisure and time is...very much out of place when one deals with this group [the poor elders]... There no longer is work, and leisure time and subsistence time seem to overlap. Thus, waiting for lunch also becomes the time in which to see other people; deciding what food to eat or what restaurant to go to becomes the main event of a whole day; marginal pursuits which are considered by most other social members as burdensome or as minor tasks, such as mending clothing, writing letters, or listening to the radio, are stretched to occupy the whole day for this group of people.

The important difference among poor old people...is that for some life has become an existential wasteland to be filled with pursuits to pass the time, while for others life is but an obstacle to overcome on the way to eternal life.

Poverty has indeed restrained the activities of old people and affected the pursuit of meanings in old age to a certain extent. Many of the poor old people who spend most of their day in the community center probably match what Fontana



describes – old people who either fill their days with minor tasks such as reading newspapers and watching their favorite TV programs, or waiting for the end of their lives while doing nothing meaningful and constructive. These poor old people's lives then appear rather meaningless when they think of nothing else but only when to have meals, watch TV programs, or even when they will die.

Apart from social gatherings and activities, poverty may also affect the lives of old people in other ways. Fontana (1977: 127-128) interviewed a sixty-six-year-old man who lives on social security,

“I’m very careful. I don’t associate with anybody, except I used to go to dances and meet the ladies.” After being asked to say more about this topic, he continues: “I still take out plenty of girls to dances. But I don’t get serious.” He explained to me that he can’t afford to get married again. Wives cost money. A friend of his “made the mistake” of remarrying in his sixties, and now he “is stuck” with his new wife’s dental bills. He said that he didn’t know any of the “girls” down here, but that he really didn’t mind. He was very emphatic about not becoming too close to anybody.

Poverty can thus affect other aspects of life in old age, other than being unable to visit friends and participate in interest classes. Poverty discourages the man whom Fontana interviewed to find a partner who can provide him with companionship and meanings in late life.

In the previous chapter, I discussed how poor health has discouraged old people from finding meanings in life since some of them feel unhappy and pessimistic about their poor health. Poverty can also affect old people’s pursuit of meanings in similar ways. Recall how Mr. Chu spoke of his receiving of government assistance after his tutorial center closed down in chapter two. What he suggests clearly illustrates how poverty and receiving government assistance can affect old people’s self-esteem and social value in society, although poverty has not discouraged, but rather encouraged, Mr. Chu to pursue meanings in his later life through engaging in voluntary services. In the last chapter, we have discussed that



many of my informants do not want to be burdens on their children and other people if their health deteriorates. Similarly, many old people also do not want to become financial burdens on their children and society. Mr. Chu suggested that he wants to “prove that CSSA is not supporting lazy people”. Yet, “CSSA feeds lazy people” is in fact a common notion in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Daily News 2002b). Although people may have more sympathy for elder recipients due to the contributions old people made in the past, more and more people began to see old people as financial burdens of society as the economic situation worsens. Yet, what is more important is how old people look at themselves as financial burdens of society, as Mr. Chu has illustrated. Old people like Mr. Chu suffers from a role change from contributor to society to financial burden on society, which can affect their values and pursuit of meanings in life.

### ***The relationship of wealth to the pursuit of meanings in old age***

Poverty seems to have negatively affected the pursuit of meanings and happiness in old age among my informants as discussed above. Then, are wealthier old people's lives happier and more meaningful than poorer old people's? Just as healthy old people have more choices than unhealthy old people, wealthy old people also seem to have more choices than poor old people, although it does not necessarily mean that every unhealthy and poor old person's life is meaningless.

The informants I regard as being “wealthy” in my research indeed do not represent the really wealthy old people in the territory. Yet, these informants I regard as being “wealthy” do not have any financial burdens, and can enjoy their lives rather freely with the money they have – some of them told me about their happy experiences travelling overseas in the last few years and their future plans to travel to other places. The majority of these “wealthy” informants came from the computer



class I went to – the requirement of eighty dollars of tuition fee per week does not seem to be a burden to them at all.

Consider the present lives of my wealthy informants, such as Ms. Yung whom we have seen in chapters two and three. Ms. Yung finds her life fulfilling and meaningful partly through her active participation in social gatherings, interest classes, and hobbies. In a tea gathering after class, she suggested her plan to go on a cruise to Alaska which she has been hoping for since a long time ago. Now that she has retired, she finally has sufficient time for it. However, it appears that the majority of what provides meanings to Ms. Yung costs money, including interest classes, hobbies, trips, and even gatherings.

Another informant, Ms. Tang, also finds meanings in attending paid classes such as computer classes, yoga classes, and various kinds of classes which she believes can improve her husband's and her health. She fills up her remaining time mainly with *yum cha* and mahjong, which are again activities and hobbies that poorer old people find rather difficult to enjoy regularly.

A third informant, Mr. Lee, is particularly interested in computer learning, photography, and chat-room conversations through the Internet. After he has gained some computer knowledge, he continues to develop his earlier interests in foreign languages and photography into chat-room conversations with foreigners and digital photography with the use of the computer. Mr. Lee told me,

I am developing my previous interests through the computer. For example, I like to learn and practice foreign languages with the computer. In the past, I like photography, so I can now put some pictures into the computer. ...we have a group of people who are interested in digital photography here [in the computer class] and so we learn together. We now have more than ten people and it's fun learning together! ...There are many new things which attract us to continue learning... So, we won't stop...



It is not only a sense of achievement and happiness that Mr. Lee has found through learning the computer and digital photography, he has also found friendship and companionship through such activities. Of course, these are costly activities that poorer old people have more difficulties engaging in.

It is perhaps quite true that many of the activities that these informants engage in cost money. I am not trying to say that money necessarily makes old people's lives happier and more meaningful. However, from these informants who consider their lives as being meaningful, it seems that money has indeed enabled them to engage in activities they want which can bring them happiness and fulfillment in life. It is perhaps fair to say that there are indeed many things that cannot be done without money, and many of these things give meaning and happiness to old people's lives.

A television program broadcasted in January 2003 introduces four old people who act as voluntary ambassadors at the airport to show travelers their directions. These old people seem to be able to find senses of achievement and satisfaction through helping other people as seen from the program. One ambassador suggested that he has to spend four hours to and fro between home and the airport, which is not only time-consuming, but costly too. It is definitely a task that a senior CSSA recipient cannot take – the transportation cost would have taken nearly half of his or her monthly assistance if he or she goes to the airport every day.

However, it is not only time and money that the old people have to possess. The program also shows the senior ambassadors guiding tourists who speak English and Mandarin. Thus, pursuing meanings and senses of usefulness through being a voluntary airport ambassadors probably also requires a certain level of education. Having explored how poverty and wealth affect the pursuit of meanings in old age, I



will now further discuss the relationship between education, as well as social class, to the pursuit of meanings in old age.

### ***The relationship of education and social class to the pursuit of meanings in old age***

So far, I have discussed the issue of money and meanings of life in old age by considering the financial status of my informants. Two related important elements that we should also consider when we discuss about money as a factor which influences life are social class and education. Social class and education are closely related to money. A higher social class and a higher level of education can lead to greater wealth, whereas a lower social class and a lower level of education can lead to poverty. However, social class and education do not always have a direct correlation with financial status, and thus should also be considered.

Atchley (2000 [1972]: 439-440) writes about how social class<sup>25</sup> may affect lives in old age:

Social class has often been used as a variable in gerontological research. Studies of retirement, widowhood, adaptation to aging, and numerous other topics have found that social class makes a difference. For example, compared with the working class and the poor, the middle class enters later life with better health, more financial resources, more activities, better housing, and fewer worries. Accordingly, middle-class people seem to cope better with just about every life course change in later life... To the extent that adequate income and good health are prerequisites for a satisfying life in later years, the working class and the poor are at a distinct disadvantage. Their jobs are unlikely to entitle them to adequate retirement income and may expose them to a greater risk of premature physical aging and disability.

What Atchley (2000 [1972]) has suggested also seem to indicate that the middle class are more likely to find meanings in later life than the working class, since they have

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<sup>25</sup> Atchley (2000 [1972]: 437) suggests that “[s]ocial classes are categories of people considered to have certain social, economic, educational, occupational, or cultural characteristics in common. Furthermore, social classes are arranged in a hierarchy of relative social desirability. Social classes are not organized groups; they are aggregates of people who would recognize one another as overall social peers and who would be recognized as such by others”.



“better health, more financial resources, more activities, better housing, ...fewer worries”, and cope better with life changes. Some of my informants, like Ms. Yuen, Ms. Cheung and Ms. Fong, who have been working as laborers throughout their lives, suffer from poorer health, poorer financial conditions, fewer activities, poorer housing, and more worries in life, compared with informants at a higher social class, like Ms. Yung, Ms. Tang and Mr. Lee, who are more able to enjoy their lives given the their better health condition, financial status and psychological well-being.

Atchley also discusses how education affects life in old age, suggesting that “...less education...usually means fewer skills for enjoying life off the job” (2000 [1972]: 441). As suggested earlier, old people who act as voluntary airport ambassadors are probably those who have attained a certain level of education and language proficiency. This is also true of the old people I met in the community centers who find meanings in life through acting as voluntary workers, such as teaching in interest classes and reporting news to other old people.

Educated people indeed have more choices than less educated ones even in later lives. The seventy-five-year-old man I mentioned earlier whom Tisdall (1989: 16-18) interviewed said, “I can’t read, so I spend a lot of time watching television. I also help grow flowers which I enjoy very much. I get seven hundred and eighty-five dollars a month from Social Welfare. You can’t play mahjong with welfare money so I never do. I go walking every morning just to pass the time”. Money is perhaps one thing which can make him happier, yet, his life in old age might also have been different if he could read and write. To some of my informants, obtaining knowledge and information through an act as simple as reading newspapers provides them with meanings in life as discussed in chapter three. Mr. Lai, for example, who does not appear to be very well off, told me that he can spend only two dollars a day



to go to the central library and read as many books he can, which he finds very fulfilling. Knowledge and information are indeed unlimited, especially in the age of the Internet. Educated old people can choose to obtain unlimited information and knowledge from the Internet, books and newspapers – a process which they can be able to find life meanings in.

Old people who are at higher social classes and with higher education level appear to have more choices and better conditions for pursuing meanings in old age, just as healthier old people have more choices than those with poorer health. However, social class and education probably mean more than just choices alone. It appears to me that old people who are at a higher social class and with higher education are more eager to learn and find life meanings in old age. They think that it is important for a person to learn and adopt new knowledge in old age in order to make life more fulfilling and meaningful. Most of those who talked about the importance of “lifelong learning” are those I met in the computer classes, whom I suppose are at a higher social class and have received more education. Some of the less educated old people I met in the community center also attend classes such as English class and Mandarin class, but their emphases on “lifelong learning”, senses of achievement, and the importance of adopting knowledge in life are not as strong as those who attend computer classes. Moreover, old people at a higher social class and with higher education level also seem to know how to enjoy life better even in old age, compared with working-class old people who have been working hard only to maintain a living throughout their lives – paying less attention to developing hobbies and relationships, and pursuing life meanings. Therefore, social class and education can affect the life attitudes and values of a person, which thus shape what a person’s old age would become – whether he or she wants to engage in meaningful



activities and pursue life meanings, or just sit there and do nothing until the end of his or her life.

### **How much does money affect the pursuit of meanings in old age?**

So far, I have discussed how money, education and social class can affect the pursuit of meanings in old age. It appears that wealthier old people are indeed more capable of pursuing meanings in old age – so are old people at higher social classes and with higher education level. Baumeister (1991: 212) writes,

...people with higher incomes are indeed slightly happier than those with low incomes. Much of the difference appears to be due to the stress and strain that accompany the very lowest incomes. Many people who are short of money suffer from endless problems about how to make ends meet. These problems carry over into conflicts with bill collectors and arguments with one's spouse over how to spend money.

Poorer old people have to use money very carefully as well, which can also create stress, problems and conflicts with family members. With so many worries and stress in life, it seems that it is indeed harder for poorer old people to pursue an enjoyable and meaningful later life. These old people have to struggle hard for a living, not to mention spending extra money for social gatherings and interest classes.

However, having insufficient money is not merely a practical issue. It can also affect the self-esteem and self-perceived social status of old people, especially among those who receive government assistance. Old people who are receiving CSSA may not want to meet their relatives and friends, or pursue meaningful activities. When CSSA receiver is such a bad label in society, old people probably do not want to let others think that they use taxpayers' money to go to *yum cha*, play mahjong, or join local trips and interest classes.

Nonetheless, just as health is only one factor which affect the pursuit of meanings in old age, money is also only one factor which determines whether an old



people can lead a meaningful life or not. Some wealthy old people are able to find meanings in their late life while some are not; similarly, some poor old people fail to find meanings in life while some do find meaning. Money alone does not determine whether an old person can find meanings in his or her later life or not. Social class and education, for example, also affect the pursuit of meanings in old age, such as Mr. Lai who spends two dollars to go to the central library to read books every day.

Although poverty can create anxieties and problems in life which discourage old people from pursuing meanings in life, personality and life attitudes, for example, also affect the pursuit of meanings in life in old age, given the fact that there are still many things that can be done without money. Many old people go to parks to practice *Tai Chi*, while others play chess and meet their friends every day in parks and community centers. I came across an old man who was trying to learn the names of the trees in a rather large park. Others bring their caged birds for a walk there. Thus, old people can still find meanings in life without money – even playing with their grandchildren at home can give life meanings to old people. On the other hand, if an old person thinks that it is useless for old people to develop any interests and relationships in old age, money will not be a significant factor which affects whether he or she can pursue life meanings in old age or not.

I would suggest that money is an influential, but not crucial, factor which affects the pursuit of meanings in old age. It is perhaps quite true that wealthy old people are in general more able to find meanings in life in old age than poor old people, given the fact that wealth is often accompanied with a higher social class and education level, while poverty is often associated with a lower social class and education level. However, given the provision of social resources in Hong Kong, such as government financial assistance and free community services, I think many

old people can still be able to pursue a meaningful life without worrying about the expenses involved. Old people with poor health may not be physically able to engage in any meaningful activities. On the other hand, money is perhaps a less crucial factor compared with health. Poverty can be a barrier to happiness when problems and anxieties in life appear, but it probably does not prevent old people from engaging in meaningful activities, even though it can discourage them from doing so. Conversely, wealth does not seem to encourage or drive old people to pursue a meaningful life either – possessing money alone does not seem to have a strong correlation with pursuing meanings in life. An old person who possesses a huge amount of money do not necessarily have to spend them on travelling, developing his or her hobbies, or doing anything which can give meanings in life if nothing else drives him or her to do so. Money alone does not determine whether an old person can find life meanings or not. It may not urge or prevent old people to pursue meanings in life, but it does affect them in their pursuits of a meaningful life.



## CHAPTER 7      DEATH AND THE PURSUIT OF MEANINGS IN OLD AGE

A person's physical life ends with death. It is perhaps reasonable to end my thesis which discusses life meanings with the topic of death, especially when old people are usually closer to death than most other people in society. However, if old people are going to die relatively soon, is it meaningful for them to pursue meanings in life if death is the end to everything? To old people, do life meanings transcend physical life? Are they doing all those meaningful activities to deny and avoid the issue of death because they are afraid of it? A few informants suggest that they can die without regrets, having achieved what they find meaningful in life before they die<sup>26</sup>. However, does it make a difference whether they die with or without regrets? After all, what does death mean to them? Are there meanings after life? The study of death is therefore appropriate and necessary in the study of life meanings in old age. If death is the end of everything, why do old people find meanings in life?

Atchley (2000 [1972]: 311) writes about the meaning of death as a social creation, which is different among people of different cultural and religious backgrounds:

Some people see death as an ugly, punitive extinction of life. Others see it as God's will or as a beautiful, rewarding transition to a new and better type of life. Some see death as hateful destruction; others see it as a welcome release. A crucial point is that death's meaning at any given time and in any given culture is mainly a social creation. For example, even in the United States, the meaning death has for a Creole, a Navaho, a Lutheran, a Catholic, a Muslim, a Jew, or a Baptist could be expected to vary systematically.

Kennedy et al. (2001: 68) suggest that religion is an answer to questions concerning the meaning of life and death:

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<sup>26</sup> In Cantonese, we say that someone *séi m ngáahn bai* (死唔眼閉) – died without his or her eyes closed – if there is something that he or she has not accomplished or witnessed in life, such as a child not married yet, or a revenge not carried out before one died.



...the realization of our own mortality is what distinguishes humans from other animals. For many people, the aging process elicits existential questions regarding the meaning of life and death. Religion is one source of answers to these questions. People often look toward religion to explain the meaning of the existence of humankind and help them to accept their own mortality. As people near the end of life and perceive time as limited, religious beliefs and practices offer people resources for coping with illness and death.

Atchley (2000 [1972]) and Kennedy et al. (2001: 68) both suggest that religion plays a very important role regarding how people face and cope with death.

In this chapter, I will discuss how old people look at the issue of death, and how religious beliefs may affect their attitudes towards death. Before I discuss the issue of death, I would first like to explore the role religious belief plays in some of my informants' life in order to find out how much it affects life attitudes and the pursuit of meanings among my informants.

### **Religious beliefs, life attitudes, and the pursuit of meanings in old age**

Baumeister (1991: 209) writes, "In one of his tirades about religion, Sigmund Freud came to the question of life's meaning. Religion, he acknowledged, does offer suggestions about what the meaning and purpose of life are". More than a third of my informants are Christians, of which the majority is Catholic. A few others suggested that they read Buddhist texts and teachings or worship Chinese gods and deities at home. So, what role does religion plays in their later lives? How do religious beliefs affect their life attitudes and the pursuit of meanings in old age?

Maves (1960: 743) suggests that "religion is meaningful to the lives of many older persons as a factor in successful adjustment to aging; but interest in and meaningfulness of religion is not necessarily correlated with age but rather with the continual maintenance of a meaningful relationship between the aging person and a religious group". One function of religion is to act as a source of life meanings



through maintaining and engaging in relationships and social networks in old age. Some of my informants pursue meanings through participation in church gatherings and activities where they can help and share with other people. When asked about the importance of religious belief in her later life, Ms. Yung, who is a Catholic, said,

The most important thing is that I go to church more often now, because church is a quiet place for you to pray and to reflect on yourself. Besides, there are many gatherings for us to share.... When you talk to each other and share with each other, you can gain a lot.... If you have a religious belief, you will have a much stronger will power... In the church, you will feel more peaceful...

As a person who treasures relationships with others, Ms. Yung finds meanings in religion through sharing with and loving other people. Religion provides spiritual support to her as well, and affects her attitudes towards life. It has not only helped her find inner peace and confidence in life, but it also enables her to forgive her husband who had an affair with another woman and died several years ago. She is even able to maintain good relationships with the children whom her husband and that woman had given birth to now. “To love, to care, and to forgive” appears to be the motto in her life – religious belief has made her later life much happier.

Religious belief has apparently affected the life attitudes of many of my informants. Mr. Lee said, “Religion is important to me... Religion is a great motivation to my...work, and influences me in dealing with people and things. I was a born Catholic. My whole family is Catholic and is a very devout family...”. Another informant, Ms. Cheung, who became a Buddhist several years ago, told me that Buddhism has changed her – “ I have become more willing to help others now...and I feel happier... I believe that I have to do good deeds now which will be accumulated into my next lives...”. Apart from attending interest classes, she spends some of her time on voluntary work which provides her with meanings in life. Her religious belief has also affected her attitudes towards money and other things in



life. She told me that it is useless saving too much money, because it maybe robbed or lost in some other ways. It is good to make donations though, since Buddha will bless you if you do so, she said. She told me she was beautiful when she was young, yet, beauty is meaningless for her because she is going to die whether she is, or was, beautiful or not. When asked what is most important to her in her life now, she responded by saying that, “Nothing is important, because you cannot bring them into the coffin. The most important thing is to stay happy”. Religion does seem to promise a happier life. It positively affects life attitudes and the pursuit of meanings in life, which some of my informants claim and believe.

Some informants think that God has promised them what they have hoped for in life. Ms Tang, for example, told me,

We probably hope that nothing bad will happen to us when we are alive. I thank God for that. Although I have come across many difficulties, my children grew up in a normal environment and haven’t become marginal people – it’s already my good fortune.

However, not every believer feels thankful to God. Mr. Chu, who feels that he is a failure even though he has not done anything bad in life, questions why God has treated him this way:

Do you believe in God? I believe in God. I believe in Jesus Christ. I am sixty-five years old now and I grew up in a Church. I feel that I am better than everyone else in all aspects... For example, I am hard-working...and sincere... I never gamble, never play mahjong...never say swear words, never drink, never smoke, never go to karaoke and night clubs, or adopt any bad habits. All these years, I only play tennis during weekends. I am good in every way. I worked hard – I even went back to the office and worked during weekends...

There are so many frustrating things, but you can’t say a word about it. The world is so unfair. So, I ask, “Is there really a God? Why doesn’t He help me?” ...I couldn’t explain that. I grew up in a Church. I knew many clergymen well, and are good friends with many of them... My whole family is Christians. But when I grew up, I started to think, “Is this how a good Christian should be like?” It shouldn’t be like this. I know the Bible very well. I read it every day... Why is it like this? ...In this society, ...what I have learnt from the Church since I was small are in fact all wrong! They are



not suitable in this society...[in which] you have to be a bad person. This goes against my principle. I learnt the good and right things since I was small, and now you say I have to learn to be a bad person? ...It has been true since historical times. Those who advised the emperor got their heads chopped off, right? All those loyal officials had their heads chopped off and those cunning officials did fine. That's how things work. It can't be changed...

In contrast to Ms. Tang, believing in God since he was small does not lead to a promising life for Mr. Chu, which makes him find life unhappy throughout his life and into his old age. He can only try to find senses of meanings and self-esteem in his later life through being a voluntary worker and continuing to play tennis well as discussed in chapter three.

Having discussed the role religion plays in some of my informants' life, I shall now turn to discuss the issue of death. Religious belief not only influences life attitudes of old people, but it can also influence their attitudes towards death.

### **How do old people face death?**

Hillier and Barrow (1999: 324) suggest that America is a "death-denying society" which uses phrases such as "passed away" and "passed on" when people talk about death – "...death is not easily discussed in American society. People tend to be sensitive and shy about discussing the topic openly. Facing death, dealing with the fact of death in a rational way, and exerting control over the manner of one's dying are all difficult situations in a society that denies death". The situation in Hong Kong is probably quite similar. Most people tend to use words and phrases such as "gone" or "not here" instead of "died" or "dead". During the interviews, it was me who first avoided using words which directly describe death when I asked my informants whether they have ever thought about when they will die. After all, they are probably closer to death than I am, and I do not know whether they will feel uncomfortable about being asked about their deaths. However, it is perhaps because

of my avoidance that some of them suggested it is perfectly all right to discuss the issue and started talking about it freely. Nonetheless, it seems that most informants still avoided uttering the words “died” or “dead”, especially when it comes to discussing their own deaths.

Atchley (2000 [1972]: 309-310) writes,

In the nineteenth century, death was a common occurrence at all stages of life... In earlier times, death was a more “normal” part of everyday life at all life stages. People died in everyday environments, and the physical death was something that most people had witnessed directly by the time they reached adulthood. Today, most deaths occur among old people and in institutional environments...

The conquering of infectious diseases and the advent of high-technology medicine have given us an illusion of control over death. The idea that death is a constant possibility has been replaced by the idea that death happens only to the old.

Death has thus mostly become an issue which appears to be mostly related to old people.

In this section, I would like to explore how old people face death. Do they fear death? Is it something that they want to escape and deny? How do deaths of a spouse, relatives and friends affect how they look at death? I will also discuss how religious belief and belief in afterlife may affect their attitudes towards death.

### ***Fear of death: uncertainties about death and fear of sufferings and loss of autonomy***

Scholars have suggested that fear of death is a universal phenomenon. Atchley (2000 [1972]: 312), for example, writes, “The most frequent reaction to the idea of death is commonly thought to be fear”. Cockerham (1997 [1991]: 217) writes, “The basic problem that human have in dealing with death is fear. ...death has been and remains a fearful event for most human beings and that fear of death is universal throughout the human species”.



However, similar to most old people interviewed by Deveson (1994) in her book containing twenty-one interviews with old people in America, none of my informants answered right away that they are afraid of death. Many of them would say something such as – “Everyone will die. Death is a normal process that everyone has to come across. So, there is nothing to be afraid of”. Of course, just because it happens to everyone and will happen to them some day probably is not enough a justification to why they are not afraid of death – if they really are not afraid. On the other hand, it may not be death itself which appears frightening – after all, it just takes you a second to end your life and in the next second, you are already dead. Rather, what old people fear most may be the uncertainties of death, and the possible pain and sufferings that they might have to encounter before they die.

Cockerham (1997 [1991: 217) writes, “Although many fears have been identified in connections with death, the primary fear is the fear of the unknown – the dread of not knowing what happens as you die and when you are dead”. Uncertainties about death are therefore one thing that people fear about death. One of my informant, seventy-five-year-old Mr. Lee, said,

This [death] is a road that everyone has to walk. It’s ordinary... I have to walk this road anyway, and no one came back from there<sup>27</sup> and tell me how it is like... No one ever told me how it is like. It’s like a bet, but whether to believe or not we don’t know. It is like a bet... I am a Catholic, so I think it’s worth betting. No one ever told us what the future<sup>28</sup> would be like. No one come back and told me... I will assume that it is true<sup>29</sup>. If it is not true, I haven’t lost anything. If it is true, I gain...

As a Catholic, Mr. Lee probably hopes that he could have a happy afterlife in heaven after he died, although he feels uncertain about whether it really exists and whether it is as wonderful a place as the Bible suggests. Nonetheless, Mr. Lee does not appear

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<sup>27</sup> Since Mr. Lee is Catholic, I suppose he means “heaven”, or simply the place people stay after they died.

<sup>28</sup> He probably means life after death.

<sup>29</sup> He probably means heaven really exists, or there is really eternal life.



to be afraid of death itself judging from what he said. His religious belief has probably reduced and minimized his fear. Seventy-four-year-old Mr. Luk also expresses his uncertainties about death – “Some people die young... This [death] is not for us to think about. We don’t know what will happen tomorrow... We can’t prevent it... Everyone will die. This is not for me to be afraid of”. The uncertainties about death are brought up by Mr. Luk’s feelings of a lack of control over death, and when it will finally arrive.

Apart from the uncertainties about death, old people also fear other things associated with death. Busse and Pfeiffer (1977 [1969]: 149) write, “...it appears from the expression of the older persons that death is feared much less than prolonged illness, dependency, or pain, which may bring the several threats of rejection and isolation, as well as loss of social role, self-determination, and dignity as an individual”. These are perhaps reasons why old people do not want to be burdens on their children and other people as discussed in the chapter on health and the pursuit of meanings in old age. Pain and the loss of autonomy may appear more frightening than death itself to old people. Williamson et al. (1980: 314) also discuss the fears associated with death:

The fear of pain is one of the most common fears associated with dying, but it is only one of the several such fears... Many fear that the process of dying will mean a loss of autonomy; the terminal phase of life may bring with it a great deal of physical and psychological dependency. Some are concerned at the prospect of being a burden on children or other family members. Others are fearful of being ignored or forgotten and express anxiety that there will be no one to offer them emotional support while they are dying. People are also concerned about the indignity of losing mental faculties and physical capacities...

Indeed, the loss of autonomy is something that some of my informants fear as they approach the end of their lives, such as Mr. Au whom I have discussed in chapter five. He does not want to be a burden on his children in his last stage of life.



Nonetheless, he does not seem to be afraid of death itself. He sounded well prepared psychologically:

Birth, aging, illnesses and death – these objective principles cannot be avoided. Among my high school classmates – I graduated in 1948 – thirteen of them have already died. We were from the same class... I received some phone calls recently: one [classmate] died in Sydney; another died in Guangzhou – our classmates are everywhere – and two more have died. These cannot be avoided. Maybe in our next class gathering, I will be “missing”<sup>30</sup>! These are objective principles... After all, in one day, [it will happen]... I won’t be afraid. I’m not worried about it.

Another informant, Ms. Tang, as we have seen in chapter five, is afraid of a loss of dependency and becoming burdens on others as she gets older. Similar to Mr. Au, the loss of good health and autonomy appear more fearful and disturbing to her than death itself.

Other informants fear the possible pain and sufferings they might have to encounter before they die. They would rather end their lives if they have to suffer. Ms. Cheung told me that she is afraid of having serious illnesses as she grows older. She would rather die earlier if it happens. She told me later on that she prefers to die at seventy something, which is about five to ten years from now. She wants to die when she is happy, and when she is not a burden on anyone as some of her relatives are. She said she wants to die without suffering. Another informant, Mr. Wong, suggested that if someone can just lie on bed and die at eighty without suffering, he would consider it a “happy death”. An old person Deveson (1994: 68) interviewed said, “Like all people, I don’t want to suffer. I would like to remain independent. My dad went just like that – dropped dead... Death itself is nothing! It’s just changing over from one state to another. It’s the suffering before death that I hope I don’t have to go through, or the loss of my independence”.

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<sup>30</sup> By “missing”, he means dead. Although he does not seem to be afraid of death, he still avoided mentioning his own death.



The deaths of others indeed affect how old people think about death. Not only do they affect their attitudes towards death, but they also bring them closer to the realities of death. However, do the deaths of others increase or decrease the fear of death among old people? Do the deaths of others make death easier or harder to accept? Powers (1982: 251-252) writes, "When an individual begins to die, much of what he suffers is the result of the fear of death on his own part and on the part of those around him. He reminds people that they, too, are going to die, which they naturally are not eager to consider." Jerrome (1992: 126) studied old people in groups and writes,

Support for the view that the death of friends brings anxiety-provoking reminders of one's own mortality is found in the behaviour of a minority of members. There are some who consciously dissociate themselves from death by leaving a club "because too many are dying", by refusing to visit a dying friend in hospital "because he was once such a marvelous figure of a man and is now wasted away"... This withdrawal from intimacy with the dying or newly bereaved arises, as one of the comments suggests, from a horror of the physical process of dying... It sometimes follows near-death experiences which leave the person emotionally vulnerable.

Nonetheless, she suggests that most other members accepted the death of other members and did not try to avoid them (Jerrome 1992: 126-129). Williamson et al. (1980: 314) suggest that deaths of others enable old people to accept their own deaths easier – "...the elderly have had more experience with friends and relatives dying. This has given them more of an opportunity to come to terms with the inevitability of their own deaths. Experience has been a source of socialization about dying and has perhaps given them an opportunity to rehearse their own deaths".

Deaths of others also have different impacts on my informants. As mentioned above, the deaths of his classmates enable Mr. Au to be psychologically prepared for his own death. He realized that he is going to be like them and die sooner or later. However, the deaths of others can bring more complex and



contradicting feelings to old people. On one hand, they realize that they are going to die as their friends and relatives did; but on the other hand, they do not want to die like them, especially when those who died have undergone pain and suffering before death. Besides, for some people, fear can increase when they feel that they are closer to death. Mr. Wong said, “Some of my friends passed away one after another. It [death] is something which must happen. You can’t escape from it... I dare not to think about it. Just let it come naturally... You can’t think about it. You don’t have to. It’s not something that you can predict. Everyone will die one day... Some people die all of a sudden, like some of my relatives and my friends’ parents did...”. The deaths of others bring Mr. Wong closer to death, but he did not want to think and talk about his own coming death even when being asked. The deaths of others thus reduce the fear of death for some and increase the fear for others.

### ***Religion, belief in afterlife, and the denial of death***

Fear of death can lead to the denial of death, since it is something that no one can escape and overcome until the end of one’s life. Becker (1973: ix) suggests that people try to deny death in one way or another – “The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity – activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny of man”. Williamson et al. (1980: 311-312) suggest that tribal societies and cultures deny death by explaining death through witchcraft and magic; while industrialized societies deny death through medical advances in extending the lives of human beings and finding cures for fatal diseases.

Religion and belief in afterlife are ways “to avoid the fatality of death” and “to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny of man” (Becker 1973: ix) in industrialized societies. Atchley (2000 [1972]: 311) writes,



To deny death is to believe that people continue to be able to experience – to see, hear, think, and feel emotions – after their physical death... Belief in an afterlife, belief in reincarnation, and belief in ghosts, spirits, angels, or demons are all ways of denying both the death of the ability to experience and an end to the integrity of personal existence.

Cockerham (1997 [1991]: 221) suggests,

The major fear of the unknown is fear of what happens after death. Beliefs about existence after death are common in most cultures, and one of the primary functions of religion is to reduce anxiety by providing answers concerning life after death... The more certain people are about life after death, the less anxiety they express.

Thus, the belief in afterlife, which exists in most religion, helps to reduce the fear of death as suggested by Atchley (2000 [1972]) and Cockerham (1997 [1991]). Do old people with religious belief fears death less than those without religious belief then? How does religious belief affect old people's attitudes towards death?

When asked whether she has ever thought about death, Ms. Tang replied, "I will go to heaven. I have already bought four pieces of land<sup>31</sup> behind a church in Canada ...". Death does not seem to be a taboo to Ms. Tang during our conversations. Perhaps, for Christians, death is only another stage of "life" and the road towards eternal life, which does not lead to sufferings and uncertainties but happiness. Ms. Yung talked about her husband's death and said,

I don't feel that he has died... I haven't moved his bed and his belongings... I don't feel that he has died. I always think of him... He is happy in heaven now, and doesn't have to suffer from illnesses in this world – he couldn't eat anything, and couldn't go anywhere [when he was sick]... I've done something nice for him upon his death... I held his funeral in a church and many people came with beautiful flowers... I feel happy that people love my husband and me...

I have no idea whether Ms. Yung really feels the same way when she said that her husband is "happy in heaven now". Perhaps, it is her religious belief which makes

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<sup>31</sup> She bought four pieces of land for burial of the bodies of her husband, her two sons and herself after they died, such that the family can be reunited after death.



her speak and believe in such way, or saying that her husband is now happy in heaven makes her feel better since she misses him so much.

Religious belief also affects the attitudes towards death among believers of other religion. When I asked Ms. Cheung, a Buddhist who believes in reincarnation, what is most important in her life now, she said, “Nothing is important, because you can’t bring them into the coffin. The most important thing is to stay happy”. Since she believes in the next life, she tries to do many good deeds in her present life such as making donations and doing voluntary work. She told me that the good deeds that she has done “will be accumulated”, which are going to make her next life better.

Williamson et al. (1980: 314-315) suggest,

Several studies have found that those who are more religious have less death anxiety (or fear of death) than the less religious. But other studies find the least religious (agnostics and atheists) are about equal to the very religious in death anxiety. In these studies those who are intermediate in religiousness or irregular church attenders tend to be highest in death anxiety... We might expect the most religious to be confident that there is an afterlife and that it will be a positive experience. The least religious are likely to reject the idea of an afterlife and with it the possibility of any negative experience after death. Thus both the most and the least religious are likely to be free of the fear that death will be unpleasant. But those who are unsure in their religious beliefs are likely to have doubts as to whether there is an afterlife, and if there is, whether it will be a pleasant experience.

In fact, Ms. Tang and Ms. Yung probably represent the most religious and most frequent church attendees among my informants, and thus may support Williamson et al.’s argument that firm beliefs in afterlife lessen fear of death. Similarly, Ms. Cheung has just become a Buddhist several years ago. She goes to listen to Buddhist’s teachings regularly and mentions about her religious belief in other topics about life during our interview. Her belief in reincarnation seems to have reduced her fear of death. On the other hand, since most Chinese worship various kinds of deities and their ancestors, none of my informants can probably be considered as completely non-religious. Ancestor worship is prevalent even among those with



other religious beliefs in Chinese societies, which may imply that the dead are assumed to be remembered and respected in some way.

Apart from the belief in afterlife in religious belief, life can also be continued upon death through other ways, such as writing a personal life story. Mr. Tse told me, “I want to write a life story of myself. I would have much to write about... I have come across the Cultural Revolution... I intended to commit suicide earlier on... I feel that my life is a legend... But I don’t have time to write...”. Berman (1994: 135) writes, “human beings are...aware of and fear death. The reflex-like response to the fear of death is to try to transcend death. Efforts to transcend death can be viewed as attempts to achieve immortality, as ways of outliving the self. Such efforts may involve striving to do something that matters and will be noticed and remembered or leaving something for the next generation.” Writing a life story, then, is also an attempt to transcend death in response to the fear of death.

### ***Why do some people fear death less than others?***

I have discussed that religious belief, especially strong ones, and the death of friends and relatives can reduce old people’s fear of death. Are there other factors that would reduce such fear? Why do some people fear death less than others?

Williamson et al. (1980: 314) writes,

Not everyone fears death to the same degree. Some have a great deal of anxiety about dying; others have very little. ...for the older person death is less likely to interrupt life plans. Usually most family and career goals have been achieved or abandoned; they see the future as offering less in the way of benefits. Another relevant factor is that many who are old have a sense of having lived their allotted time; they see themselves as already living on borrowed time.

Atchley (2000 [1972]: 313) writes, “Less acceptance and more fear of death might be expected among older people who have dependent children, disabled spouses, career goals yet to be achieved, or socially crucial positions”. For Ms. Yung, for example,



her children have already grown up and formed their own families. She is proud of the career she has resigned from, and has found her life very fulfilling. She said, “You won’t know [when you will die]. But I have been happy in my life, enjoyed a lot in life, and can die without regrets... I’ve been to the most beautiful restaurants, the most expensive hotels, ...the best places, and have been on a cruise twice... So, what else do I need to regret in life?” Ms. Yung told me she can die without regrets. On the other hand, Mr. Chu, who feels that he has not achieved much in life and even feels that he has been a failure, expressed his fear and denial of death. He said,

I don’t feel I am sixty something. I think I still have more than sixty years to go! I won’t die in such a short time... If most people live up to seventy something, does that mean I only have a few more years of life? So of course, I couldn’t have been sixty something!

It appears that Mr. Chu is trying to deny his age and his death by thinking that he still has sixty more years to live at the age of sixty-six. He refuses to think that he is already at a later stage of his life, without achieving and enjoying much in life. For him, time flies too quickly. He does not even have a family anymore and is living alone. His wife divorced him and took his son away from him; and his relationships with his brothers and sisters seem unfulfilling.

It appears that if old people do not have to worry about their family and career anymore, they will probably have less fear of death. However, many of my informants are living in a new stage of life after they retired – some attend classes and aim at achieving new knowledge in life; some become volunteer workers and want to help as many people as they can before they die; and a few established a computer organization and hope that more old people can benefit from it. Does that mean these old people still have goals and burdens in life and have greater fear of death? One founder of the computer organization told me that he still wants to see it develop. However, for most other old people, what Williamson et al. (1980: 314)

suggest might be quite true – “many who are old have a sense of having lived their allotted time; they see themselves as already living on borrowed time”. Therefore, how long this new and last stage of their life will last may not be most crucial to them. The most important thing is that they already have their basic life goals achieved so that they can die without regrets. After all, old people are not expected to have long-term goals anymore. What they are able to achieve and gain in their late life may appear like extra gifts in their life.

### **Are there meanings after life?**

So far, I have discussed how old people see death, their fear of death, and how religious belief affects their attitudes towards death. Let me now return to the questions asked at the beginning of the chapter. Why do old people bother finding meanings in life if they are going to die relatively soon anyway? Are there meanings after life?

For old people who believe in afterlife, the meanings they have found in their existing life will probably transcend life and death. Since they are going to “live on” after they die, what they have done would not appear meaningless. Moreover, believers of most religions think that under God’s will, they should love and help people in their existing life, which is what makes their life meaningful even though they will listen to God’s call one day and go to heaven. My informant, Ms. Yung, a devout Catholic, for example, told me that her meanings of life come from God, and from her love and care towards other people. Loving people is what makes her life meaningful, even though she will die one day, she claims. For Catholics, for example, loving people is also seen as a preparation for eternal life; and for



Buddhists, as my informant Ms. Cheung suggested, doing good deeds prepares her for a better next life through reincarnation.

On the other hand, there are old people who think that they would become only ash after they die. So, why do these old people want to find meanings in their late life? Some informants suggest that they can then die without regrets. They would not regret that they have not achieved a meaningful and fulfilling life in the moment before they die. However, does it matter whether their life has been meaningful or not, or whether they will die with or without regrets if they are going to die and turn into ash anyway? I dare not ask my informants about this. I do not want them to go home to think about it, and decide that they would stop pursuing meanings in life because I questioned whether it is meaningful to find meanings in their late life. Nonetheless, pursuing meanings in their last stage of life is still important to many of them, even though they are going to die in the next few years or the next two decades. Whether those meanings still exist as they die does not seem to be important to them. Being able to pursue a meaningful and fulfilling life in the present appears important and sufficient to them. Yalom (1990: 463) suggests that “[w]e are uncomfortable in the absence of meaning”. It is perhaps our human nature to pursue meanings in life and to make our life fulfilling. Otherwise, most people might have committed suicide at some stage of their life because they find life totally meaningless since we are going to die anyway. It is perhaps our human instinct to try to live a meaningful life.

In Hong Kong, people can have many choices concerning what to believe about death. One can believe in the Christian God, Buddha, *Guan Yin* and various kinds of Chinese deities, or other divine or supernatural beings, and thus the world which has been promised after death by these different religions; one can also

become an ancestor worshipped by their offspring, a western ghost, or a Chinese soul. We pray for the dead; we burn paper money to the dead; and we sometimes talk to our ancestors and loved ones who have died. Although we do not know what will happen to us after we die, most people seem to believe in life after death to different extents. Most of us do not believe that we will become nothing after we died. Many of us seem to believe that we will exist somewhere, perhaps in a different world; or at least, we would like to think that we will.

After all, most people are uncertain of what will happen to them after death. If they do not know whether there will be life after death, what they can only do is to try to live a meaningful life when they are still alive. Pursuing meanings in life can then also be a way to deny and avoid the issue of death. We do not know what is going to happen to us after we die; we fear death and refuse to think that we would become nothing and disappear totally when we die. So, we try to make our lives meaningful in order to feel good about ourselves such that we can die without regrets. Of course, not everyone feels so pessimistic towards life and death. Even though we have died, we will be remembered and may continue to influence others' lives. We have existed in this world, and our life has been meaningful. It is not true that nothing will be left. Memories of us and works that we have done persist. As Mathews (1996: 154) writes,

To the extent that one believes in life after death, one's personal dreams don't end as death approaches; to the extent that one doesn't believe in life after death, one's dreams do end, but for the hope of being remembered and of the future happiness, unbeknownst to oneself, of one's family and descendents.

Towards the end of his book, Mathews (1996: 254) suggests that the meanings of life lie not on how much we know about life and death, but on the ignorance of people and the various possibilities about life and death. We do not know what will happen to us after we die anyway, so most of us try to live a



meaningful life, just as most of my informants do. Perhaps what they have done will influence their children and other people; perhaps they will “live” happily in another world after they die because they have done good things in their life and their life has been meaningful. Mathews (1996: 255) writes, “We can’t know why we were put on the planet, to live our lives...; we can only shape our shaped lives from the array of cultural conceptions around us, choose carefully our meanings and our potential transcendence, and live our lives as if those meanings were real”. Most people are still able to choose to pursue a meaningful life despite the uncertainties about life and death, and because of the possibilities which might come about. Current social trends tell old people that they deserve a meaningful life as well – various kinds of classes and activities have been designed for old people, university programs for old people were launched, and the government publicized the idea of lifelong learning – which may also be the reason why many of them choose to pursue a meaningful life in old age even though they realized that they are going to die relatively soon. Whether life meanings transcend life and death or not appear less important to them then.

## CHAPTER 8 CONCLUSION

This thesis has aimed at exploring how old people in Hong Kong pursue a meaningful life once they lost earlier social roles as economic producers and nurturers of their children. I have discussed in the last few chapters what being old means, the sources of meanings in old age, factors which affect the pursuit of a meaningful life in old age, and the relationship between death and the pursuit of a meaningful life in old age. It is through in-depth interviews with old people and participant observation in a few pursuits that old people engage in that I have explored how old people pursue a meaningful life in old age, and what hinders those who fail to do so.

In this final chapter, I will discuss why this study of old people's senses of the meanings of their lives is important, how old people can best pursue a meaningful life in old age, and what the government and social agencies can do to assist them in doing so.

### **The study of the pursuit of a meaningful life in old age as a relatively new topic**

In the introduction, I have suggested briefly the significance of this study of the pursuit of a meaningful life in old age, particularly in Hong Kong. I have suggested that this study is worth exploring in a capitalist, industrial, and postcolonial society like Hong Kong, where retired old people who do not work and produce, and lag behind in technological development are being devalued. The influence of "Western values" which stress individualism and seem to oppose traditional values of filial piety make young people feel less obligated to take care of their aged parents. In today's society, the concept of "family" has changed from extended families in the past to nuclear families, which exclude older parents.



Moreover, the relatively high elderly suicide rate in Hong Kong also indicate the losses of meanings, social status and roles among old people in Hong Kong. As old people have lost their most important roles as economic producers and nurturers of their children, we need to learn about how and where they can find life meanings in their later stage of life which can last for two or three decades or more. Towards the end of the thesis, I would like to explore why this study is relevant and important today and in the future, in terms of rapid technological advancement, changes in family, increasing life expectancy, and the new concept of retirement.

In her book *Culture and Commitment*, Margaret Mead (1972 [1970]: 31) suggests three different kinds of culture – “postfigurative, in which children learn primarily from their forebears, cofigurative, in which both children and adults learn from their peers, and prefigurative, in which adults learn also from their children”. She writes,

We are entering a period, new in history, in which the young are taking on new authority in their prefigurative apprehension of the still unknown future (31).

Today, nowhere in the world are there elders who know what the children know, no matter how remote and simple the societies are in which the children live. In the past there were always some elders who knew more than any children in terms of their experience of having grown up within a cultural system. Today there are none. It is not only that parents are no longer guides, but that there are no guides, whether one seeks them in one’s own country or abroad. There are no elders who know what those who have been reared within the last twenty years know about the world into which they were born (101-102).

Margaret Mead wrote about this more than thirty years ago, but rapid technological advancement has brought this phenomenon further in the last few decades, threatening old people’s social status and authority. Tapscott (1998: 36) writes,

When it comes to understanding and using the new media and technology, many parents are falling woefully behind their children.... Parents, teachers, and other adults are looking to children for information and help with computers.... Society has never before experienced this phenomenon of the



knowledge hierarchy being so effectively flipped on its head. But it is definitely happening and the situation is magnified with each new technology.

Some of my informants, for example, seek help from their children in learning to use the computer but were treated with disrespect. Some of their children even say that they are stupid and refuse to teach them. Knowing more than their older parents do puts the children into a higher and more powerful position, as Tapscott (1998: 36) suggests:

This is a unique period in history in that the role of the child in the home is changing. ...in the past the parents were the authority figures in terms of anything of particular value. The notion of the child being able to do anything new, novel, or really useful for the parent was bogus. Parents traditionally have known more than children in virtually every conceivable domain... (36)

Indeed, old people's status in the family has been declining, not only due to the rapid technological advancement, but also changes in social values. Sung (2000: 201) writes about the situation in East Asian countries:

In recent years, the number of three-generation families has decreased, the authority of elderly members is declining, and a growing number of adult children live separately from their aged parents. Adult children prefer individualistic lifestyles, value reciprocity between generations, and demand freedom from rigid family rules and obligations. Thus, the family is changing – the very institution in which the elderly have been respected and cared for.

These shifts largely indicate a new trend, a move from authoritarian and patriarchal relationships to egalitarian and reciprocal patterns of mutual respect between generations.

Changes in family and social values thus lead to a further decline of social status of the old.

Some scholars suggested that modernization causes a decline in social status among old people. Palmore (1975: 3), for example, writes,

[The modernization theory] assumes that the status of the aged in preindustrial societies...tends to be high because the aged tend to accumulate knowledge and wisdom through their years of experience and to build their



power over land, extended family, government, religious, and other institutions. Industrialization, however, decreases the importance of the extended family, increases geographical mobility, and rapidly changes technology, social structure, and cultural values.

Foner (1984b: 245), however, disagrees that modernization has always led to a decline of social status of the old:

These changes, such as integration into a world economic system, the spread of western education, and the introduction of industrial technologies, were ushered in by contact with the industrial world in the past hundred years or so. Contrary to the predictions of modernization theory, they were not necessarily detrimental to the old. True, in many nonindustrial societies these changes meant that the old held fewer valued roles and rewards while the young had greater scope than before. But in a number of societies, the old kept, in some instances increased, important powers and privileges.

It is perhaps true that modernization has not led to a decline of social status of the old in every society. Yet, in societies like Hong Kong and Japan, it seems that modernization has indeed decreased the social status of the old to different extents, as well as decreasing the importance of traditional concepts of filial piety. Loss of social status and roles can lead to senses of loss of meanings in life.

In the past, most people died before they became old. However, life expectancy has increased due to medical advances. As we have seen in chapter one, it is projected that by 2029, the proportion of people aged sixty-five or above will increase to twenty percent of the population in Hong Kong (HKSAR 2000). By 2050, the world population of old people will exceed the population of children aged from birth to fourteen (APIAS 2001b). Meanwhile, as life expectancy increases, the relatively new concept of “retirement” was introduced. Peterson (2000 [1999]: 132) writes, “Until World War II, even in industrial societies, most elderly men remained at work. Old people were expected to be productive as long as they were able, and the very word ‘retirement’ had the negative connotations of what one did with a used-up machine”. Although retirement was being introduced, specific social roles



are not given to the retirees who are now living much longer than before. Palmore (1975: 3-4) writes about the relationship between retirement and social status:

Marxian theory asserts that culture and social structure are determined by the economic system and that a person's status is determined by his relationship to the means of production. But in capitalist industrialized societies most aged are retired and have no relationship to the means of production. Therefore, the status of the aged in industrialized societies should be relatively low according to this theory.

As old people lose their roles as economic producers, they lose their social status and financial rewards as well. It is thus necessary for old people to regain sources of meanings in life with all these changes in society which lead to losses of social roles, social and family status and sources of meanings in old age.

Indeed, old people may not be able to adapt to the changes which are going on in society, which leads further to senses of loss in old age. For instance, many of my informants used to take care of their old parents and gave a large portion of their salary to them when their parents were still alive. So, to what extent are they able to accept the fact that they cannot rely on their children anymore? Most informants feel rather reluctant to talk about it, while a few suggested that they realized society has changed. Moreover, many old people in Hong Kong are receiving government assistance, which is again something new to the old people. How do they feel about receiving government assistance and being financial burdens on society when their parents did not obtain government assistance in the past? As discussed in earlier chapters, receiving government assistance hurts Mr. Chu's dignity, making him feel that he is useless in society now, for not being able to earn enough money for his old age. Furthermore, the government increasingly publicizes lifelong learning. Some old people thus feel the "need" to learn something and live purposefully. These are all new to the old people in this generation and they may have difficulty coping with the changes in society, which makes the study of the pursuit of a meaningful life in



old age necessary. Society and its values keep changing, but personal values, beliefs, and experiences may not be able to change at the same pace. Old people need to know what alternatives they can have, and how they can live meaningfully, especially when life expectancy will continue to rise, more illnesses can be cured, and technology will advance more rapidly. It is perhaps human nature to attempt to live meaningfully. After all, we cannot stay alive for decades, feeling that nothing is meaningful in life or we live for nothing and no one at all. Meanings can be created. It is therefore necessary for us to explore the possibilities and opportunities available for old people in their later stage of life.

### **How can old people find more meaningful lives?**

In previous chapters, I have discussed several sources of meanings in life and a few factors which can affect the pursuit of a meaningful life in old age. I have attempted to suggest several common sources where my informants find meanings, including relationships and companionship, services to others, personal achievements in old age, leisure and hobbies, and old people's pasts and former achievements in life. Most of my informants pursue meanings in life from one or more of these sources. There are, of course, many other areas in which old people can find life meanings. After all, each of us is a unique individual living within the same cultural context, but with different personal backgrounds. Different things may provide different individuals with meanings in life – it can be their children, God, their dignity, or some particular experiences or encounters in life. By the same token, it can also be a particular person, some particular memories or experiences in life, or a certain belief which affect the pursuit of a meaningful life for an old person.

In the last few chapters, I have suggested that gender, health, money, education level, religious belief and subjective factors such as personality, life experiences and attitudes towards life may affect the pursuit of a meaningful life in old age, which also helps explain why some old people find meanings in their later life while some do not.

I have suggested that men and women lose and gain life meanings in old age differently. Although both men and women lose their social role as an economic producer as they age, men tend to lose senses of achievement and worthiness in society given their expected social role as the major breadwinner of the family, while women tend to lose relationships and monetary rewards which may be recovered elsewhere, except among those who worked in more prestigious jobs and positions. I have also suggested that both men and women lose their social roles as nurturers of their children and grandchildren to a similar extent as they grow old. I then explored the loss of youth among men and women, suggesting that men tend to associate the loss of youth as reflected in changes in appearance and deterioration of health with the loss of ability, usefulness and social respect while women to some extent do not. Men and women may engage in different activities in old age. In fact, older men tend to aim at attaining knowledge and achievement through engaging in activities, while older women tend to aim at constructing and maintaining relationships through participating in activities.

I have suggested that health is one of the most important determining factors to the pursuit of a meaningful life, in which poor health is a major reason for elderly suicide in Hong Kong. Pursuing good health is itself a source of meanings among some of my informants. I have suggested that poor health indeed discourages and hinders old people in the pursuit of a meaningful life, although many of these old



people are actually healthy enough to have engaged in meaningful activities. On the other hand, although most old people who engage in meaningful activities appear to have better health, good health does not guarantee a happy and meaningful life. Healthy old people may have more choices than unhealthy ones; however, among old people who are not bedridden or suffering from serious illnesses, self-perceived health, rather than the actual health condition, is probably a more relevant measurement in determining the pursuit of a meaningful life in old age.

Many old people in Hong Kong suffer from poverty since retirement pensions were not available for the majority of retirees in Hong Kong and many children today either do not feel obligated or are unable to support their older parents financially. I have suggested that poverty indeed restrains old people from engaging in meaningful activities, since many cannot even afford the transportation costs involved and poverty may affect their self-esteem especially among those who have to rely on government assistance. Similar to possessing good health, wealthier old people have more choices than poor old people, even though money itself does not automatically lead to a meaningful life. Moreover, social class and education level also affect the pursuit of a meaningful life in old age – old people who are at a higher social class and with higher education levels tend to be more eager to enjoy life, attain knowledge and thus pursue a meaningful life in old age, along with the greater range of choices they have. Nonetheless, given the social resources available in Hong Kong, such as government assistance and free community services, I have suggested that money is perhaps a less crucial factor than health in determining the pursuit of a meaningful life in old age.

Old people with poorer health and financial condition, lower education level and in a lower social class usually have less choices than those with better health,



financial condition, education, and in a higher social class. These poorer conditions discourage old people from pursuing a meaningful life and eliminate some of the choices they could have if they were in more favorable conditions. However, these are only objective and measurable factors that I have investigated. Old people's personality and life attitudes, for example, are also important factors which determine whether their life would be meaningful, for if an old person feels optimistic about life, he or she could definitely find life meaningful even if he or she has relatively poor health, financial condition and education – perhaps except those who are seriously ill or bedridden. I have suggested in the last few chapters that old people with less favorable conditions have less choices and may be discouraged from pursuing a meaningful life, but the most important factors are perhaps their personality and attitudes towards life which are rather difficult to be discussed and investigated. On the other hand, possessing favorable criteria does not mean that a person's life will automatically become meaningful.

Consider again several of my informants.

Ms. Yung, for example, is widowed and living alone, healthy and quite well off. She finds life meanings through relationships and love from others, personal achievements through learning new things and establishing the computer organization, her hobbies and interests, and her former achievements in life. Health, money and her religious belief favor her in her pursuit of meanings in life. On the other hand, the death of his husband and her children forming their own families do not seem to have affected her attitudes towards life or discouraged her to pursue a meaningful later life.

Mr. Au is healthy and educated, but not very well off. He is living with his wife now, and seldom sees his children. He suggested that he can still rely on his



own savings now, but will have to apply for CSSA after he used them up. For him, two dollars' transportation cost is already sufficient for him to adopt unlimited knowledge from the library which seems to provide him with the most meanings in life along with doing volunteer work in the community center. Good health and high education level thus favor him in his pursuit of a meaningful life, while money does not seem to have discouraged him in doing so.

On the other hand, Ms. Ho is a Catholic as Ms. Yung does. Though not in perfect health, she can walk, see and hear without much difficulty. She has received little schooling. She is living with two unmarried daughters and a granddaughter. She told me that her children give her so much money that she will never be able to use them up. Her children and grandchildren celebrate her birthday, Mothers' Day, Chinese New Year and other festivals with her every year. In terms of relationships with children and grandchildren, she appears to be the happiest among all my informants judging from the frequency of seeing them and the money she receives from them. However, this, together with money, reasonably good health and her religious belief have not encouraged her to pursue a meaningful old age apart from chatting with a few friends for a while every day. Her low education level and personality have perhaps made her feel that old people have little possibilities apart from waiting for their deaths.

Mr. Chu is divorced, living alone, receiving CSSA, educated, and physically healthy enough to play tennis several times a week although he has to rely on a hearing aid. Poverty has discouraged him in pursuing life meanings through learning to use the computer, for example, as he said he does not have enough money to buy a computer even after he learns to use it. More importantly, poverty grabs away his dignity. On the other hand, education has not encouraged him to



pursue meanings in life, although it enables him to teach other old people English in the community center, which he sees as a way to “work” for society while he receives CSSA. Even though he is educated, reasonably healthy and has a religious belief, the hardships and bad experiences he encountered in life affect his life attitudes and personal values, which discourage him in finding a meaningful life.

We thus see from these informants that factors such as health, money, education and religious belief are only part of the story. Attitudes towards life, personalities and life experiences, which differ from individual to individual, are also important factors which determine whether an old person can pursue a meaningful life or not. Old people who have positive life attitudes and optimistic personalities like Ms. Yung and Mr. Au are most probably able to pursue a meaningful life. They tend to see possibilities in life and are willing to explore them. Old people like Ms. Yung are also eager to develop relationships with people around them. On the other hand, old people like Ms. Ho who think that they are useless and worthless in society, and old people like Mr. Chu who think that life is miserable are probably less able to pursue a meaningful life even though they possess favorable conditions.

What I have discussed in the thesis are objective and measurable factors, such as health, financial condition, and social class, which are probably difficult to be changed especially in old age when people have fewer choices but more constraints. Old people can only be able to pursue meaningful and fulfilling lives by adjusting their life attitudes, adapting to aging and social changes, exploring the possibilities available for them, and rethinking what can make their life meaningful. As discussed earlier in the thesis, some old people with relatively poor health, financial conditions and education can still pursue meaningful lives in old age.



Among some of my informants, for example, the idea of lifelong learning urges them to explore the possibility to acquire new knowledge in old age. One will never find life meaningful if he or she does not feel the need to, or do not know the possibilities available for them.

### **What can social agencies and government do to help old people pursue a meaningful later life?**

As the population of the old increases, government and social agencies have placed more concern on old people and their later lives. In fact, as an old person himself, the Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa pledged to help old people in Hong Kong to find their self-worth since his first policy address after the hand over. Apart from organizing various kinds of activities for the old, the government tries to emphasize the idea of a happy and meaningful old age through publications and campaigns. An advertisement broadcast on television and on the radio about a year ago, for example, shows two contradictory aspects of a retired life – one which is pessimistic and meaningless with an old man suggesting that old people are useless; and a meaningful and optimistic one with the same old man suggesting that he is acting as a volunteer worker at a community center and is going to learn computer from his grandson. The advertisement intends to publicize positive life attitudes in old age through introducing various ways old people can find meaning; or at least, it suggests various ways through which old people can pass their time after they retire. As discussed in chapter three, the government has launched the “Opportunities for the Elderly Project” since 1999, which aims at encouraging old people to acquire new knowledge and participate in community affairs. However, I wonder how successful the messages are in passing on to old people. Publication through the mass media is perhaps the most effective way, but the advertisement mentioned



above only appeared on television for about a year from my observation. On the other hand, the “Opportunities for the Elderly Project” mainly serves the purpose of providing funds for activities organized by community organizations. Whether old people are able to receive its message relies on the effectiveness of the activities held with the use of its fund.

Kwan (2002: 51) criticizes Tung Chee-hwa for breaking the promises he made in his 1999 policy address regarding elderly welfare:

The Chief Executive’s latest Policy Address was a totally disappointing testimony to the administration’s sensitivity to the people’s needs and aspirations... The most needy members of society are not receiving a cent. In last year’s Policy Address, the Chief Executive announced a review of the Old Age Allowance scheme, signalling the possibility of higher payments, but those words have been proven empty... Despite all of his talk about showing care and respect for the aged, poverty-stricken, elderly people do not seem to exist in his vision of a knowledge-based economy.

Kwan’s criticisms target the lack of financial assistance provided to old people in Hong Kong. On the other hand, the government does not seem to have done much to assist old people to find senses of self-worth and meaningfulness in their later stage of life.

The promotion of the idea of “lifelong learning”<sup>16</sup> is perhaps much more successful. Some of my informants have uttered this phrase to me, for example, when asked how and why they pursue life meanings through learning new things. It is perhaps some kind of slogan or concept that old people need most. It seems that the two words, or in fact four characters in Chinese, serve the purpose quite well of reminding old people what they should or can do in old age. Old people really need to be informed about the possibilities and opportunities available to them, especially when the majority of old people have relatively low education level. Publications of

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<sup>32</sup> Lifelong learning in Chinese is 終身學習 (*jùngshēn hōhkaap*).



concepts and ideas that can be understood or even memorized by old people easily are thus necessary.

As suggested earlier, increasing life expectancy, the introduction of retirement, changes in family, and declining social status are some changes which have occurred in the last few decades and are affecting senses of meaningfulness among old people. What can government and social agencies do to help solve these problems, or the problems arisen from them?

Increasing life expectancy and retirement have not only led to the loss of one of the most important social roles and sources of life meanings among old people, but have also led to the problem of poverty among many old people in Hong Kong. Lee (2001: 106-107) writes:

The proposed Mandatory Provident Fund scheme [which has already initiated in 2000] does nothing to resolve the financial problems of those who have already retired, or those who are retiring from work shortly... The government still has to propose a solution to assist those elderly and the working poor in need of financial assistance. The easiest solution would be to increase the CSSA to a level, which would adequately meet the basic living needs of the elderly and the working poor.

The government definitely has to do something to improve the financial condition of the elderly who are still the major receivers of CSSA despite the economic downturn. As suggested in chapter six, poverty lowers old people's self-esteem and narrows their choices in the pursuit of a meaningful life. Limited financial resources is of course an important issue, but Lee (2001: 108) also discusses another reason why the government has not provided sufficient financial assistance to old people:

...the Hong Kong government believed that social welfare services should not be organized in such a way that would break down the traditional sense of responsibility of the family to care for the aged and the infirm... The more recent policy paper on social welfare states that the family must be the primary provider of care and welfare for the needy. Hence, the social security policy that now exists in Hong Kong puts the family as the first line of defense against poverty... What this means for formal social security is



that it confines the role of the government to meeting only the most basic needs of the most deserving, in the direst need of financial assistance.

The government thus retains its view that children are expected to take care of their parents in our society with Chinese traditional values. However, families are indeed changing and many children no longer support their parents anymore. The government's assumptions and expectations do not appear realistic. If the government really wants to maintain the principle of its policy, it must develop ways to encourage children to take care of their old parents. Laws have been established in Mainland China, Japan and Singapore to make sure that children do not abandon their old parents (Martin 1988: 110). Martin (1988: 110) suggests that "another strategy is to provide financial incentives for families to continue caring for their elderly relatives". In Hong Kong, those who take care of their old parents can receive an income tax relief as in Japan and Singapore. The problem is that those who are paying little or no tax as is the case for most people in Hong Kong do not benefit from this, and thus the tax relief does not increase their incentive to support their old parents or grandparents. On the other hand, for those who are paying larger amount of taxes, the tax deducted probably cannot cover much of their parents' living expenses given the relatively high living standard in Hong Kong. Tax relief thus does not seem to have successfully encouraged younger people to take care of the old.

Regarding the issue of retirement, it has been suggested that the retirement age should be raised or abolished. A lecturer from a local university suggests, "...we have a highly educated population aged forty to fifty years old now. If we still use the mandatory retirement system in the next twenty to thirty years, we will lose many capable people to contribute to society. ...Government and private sectors should imitate America and cancel the retirement age" (Hong Kong Daily



News 2002g). Martin (1988: 105) writes, "Only the governments of the economically and demographically more advanced countries of Asia have recognized the productive capabilities of elderly people and have begun to institute programs to encourage their continued employment". In Hong Kong, larger companies and government sectors may officially require employees to retire at a certain age, but old people are not prohibited to work by law. However, as the economy goes down and unemployment rates rise, jobs that old people used to work in are taken up by young people. It has also been suggested that society should offer opportunities to young people who are seeking jobs while old people should retire and relax. Most old people probably can only earn a living and find meanings through work achievement as the economy prospers and the demand for employees is high.

So, what other alternatives do old people have if work is not available for them? What else can government and social agencies offer them to help them regain their senses of self-worth and meaning in society? Volunteer work probably resembles paid work most, and provides senses of usefulness and meaningfulness through contributing to society and helping others as some of my informants have suggested. Kwan and Chan (2002: 270) write,

Time spent in service to others is time well spent... Few other activities can rival volunteer work as a source of "good feelings" about oneself. For older people, the volunteer role is a potential source of meaningful activity and status which can counteract the marginality and demoralization of old age... There is...a need to develop ways of encouraging older people to participate, particularly those who have been relatively uninvolved.

Although one aim of the "Opportunities for the Elderly Project" is to promote volunteerism among old people, the government indeed has to work harder on it. Mr. Chu told me with anger about his unpleasant experience when he volunteered to do



community services in one community organization<sup>33</sup>. If it is not his strong desire to prove that he is “working” for society while he obtains CSSA, the unpleasant experience would probably have discouraged him to participate in volunteer service forever. Kwan and Cheung (2002: 296-297) write,

That newly retired people did not volunteer more frequently than others might reflect the absence of an effective mechanism in Hong Kong for recruiting them for volunteer service. Therefore, in Western countries where retired senior volunteer programs have been running effectively for decades, newly retired people would have more exposure to and willing to participate in volunteering.

Social workers can contribute positively to volunteer members’ continual commitment. They appear to provide encouragement and advice specific to individual members... Therefore, social workers can influence, encourage, and lead volunteer members to continue their volunteer work, when learning about how to volunteer is no longer their concern.

Hong Kong probably has to catch up a little. Without the introduction and encouragement of social workers, very few old people will see volunteering as a choice of pursuing meanings in old age. My informants who participated in volunteer work, for example, became volunteer workers under the introduction of the social workers in the community center. While it attempts to promote volunteerism, the government must make sure that its allocated funds are in proper use and its aim can be met. Experiences like Mr. Chu’s indeed discourage old people from participating in volunteer services.

Cockerham (1997[1991]) attempts to foresee the future of aging towards the end of his book:

In advanced industrial societies, old people will be more affluent, better educated, and more involved in politics than ever before... Adequate old age pensions and health care delivery, along with government policies supportive of their needs, will be major features of modern welfare

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<sup>33</sup> Mr. Chu told me that the community organization requires him to pay for some courses on volunteer services before he can serve. However, after he has paid and attended the courses, he has never received the certificate which proves that he has taken the courses, and the organization has never asked him to do volunteer services. He feels very disappointed about that.



states. ...the elderly are likely to be relatively healthy throughout much of their old age, perhaps, remaining fit until prior to death (246).

As the world moves into the twenty-first century, the various nations on the globe will become increasingly concerned with old age policy. Efforts to hold down the cost of health care and pensions for the elderly are not likely to be successful as the aged population expands. ...the governments of the world will all more or less be required to expand and improve health and social services for old people (248).

The same probably applies to Hong Kong. Old people in the next generations will probably be more affluent, educated, and healthy. The mandatory pension scheme has recently been carried out; eight universities are now admitting students rather than two more than a decade ago; and health education has been strengthened among people of different age groups. Thus, young people in this generation are already going to age rather differently than their parents and grandparents did.

Will old people's lives become more meaningful then? I have suggested that better health, financial condition, education, and so on are favorable conditions for the pursuit of a meaningful life in old age, since old people with favorable conditions enjoy more choices and opportunities. On the other hand, I have also suggested that possessing favorable conditions does not mean that those old people will automatically have a meaningful life. Whether old people's lives will be meaningful or not also depends on other subjective factors such as personality and life attitudes, as well as the assistance and encouragement from government and social agencies which help old people in their pursuit of a meaningful life. When social welfare has been strengthened and living conditions of the old improved, government and old people themselves have to think carefully about what they can do to make the latter's lives more meaningful. Society and culture are ever changing, but a person's values and beliefs do not always change in the same pace. As both society and life stage change, there are indeed many things for old people to adjust



to. Only when old people overcome these cultural, social and personal changes in terms of physical change and changes in social roles and status, will they be more able to investigate the possibilities to the pursuit of a meaningful life.

I engaged in this research examining how to pursue a meaningful life in the later stage of life, for a personal reason. What would I become when I grow old? Where would I find sources of life meanings? Would I be learning the latest technology when I grow old? Would I feel miserable about life because younger people see old people as huge burdens and have no respect for the old at all? Would I be like my informants? To be honest, I still tend to believe that I am going to be different from them, although I have found out that some of my informants were also educated and grew up in middle-class families. Perhaps, I will be different, because culture and society continue to change, and more importantly, I have done this research to explore how old people pursue a meaningful life, from which I have obtained and shared valuable experiences about life with my informants. While I believe to some extent that I would be different from them when I grow old, it is in fact my informants who gave me a better understanding about what being old would be like and what choices I could possibly have in old age. I also realize from them how life, culture and society could change such that I should better prepare myself for all these changes – some informants suggested that they have not anticipated what they are encountering now and feel a bit lost and helpless in old age. I began to realize that in this rapidly changing society, not only do we have to understand what being old would be like, but we have to understand that culture and social values change, and be ready to adapt to these changes. There are still forty more years to go if I retire at age sixty-five. Huge changes can occur within forty years.



In the last forty years, for example, the invention of the Internet has changed human relationships and forms of communications – people can now chat with and even fall in love and have “cyber sex” with someone they have never seen before through the use of the Internet. Who knows what human relationships and social values would become after several decades?

Culture is not static, but is ever changing. Yet, this does not mean that society will continue to pay less respect and emphasis on the old people who are the poorest in society as occurred in the last few decades. Old people may have social roles to play in the future. As the elderly population continues to grow, we already begin to foresee improvements in welfare and living standard of the old in the coming generations. Finally, however, this is individual. Perhaps it is now time for me to prepare for my old age, and be ready to adjust myself to cultural and social changes as I grow older, a process I have already started as this research commenced.

Through this thesis, we have a better understanding of how we can pursue a meaningful life in old age, through the investigations of several sources of life meanings among my informants and various factors which can affect the pursuit of a meaningful later life. We understand that these factors may be influential, but other subjective factors such as life attitudes, life experiences and personalities also determine whether an old person can pursue a meaningful life or not. I have also suggested that old people should be able to accept and adapt to changes in life, culture and society as they age in order to explore the possibilities available for them and what can make their life meaningful. This thesis will be useful for the government, social agencies and us to understand how old people can pursue meanings in old age, as the population of the aged continues to grow and society and cultural values change through time.



## APPENDIX

### Interview guide

1. What do you usually do now? (Can ask the informant to describe a typical day.)
  - Do you try to learn anything or just hang around with your friends here (depending on where the informant is found)? When did you start learning or practicing this and why? When did you start coming here and why? (etc.)
  - Do you feel that you are busy enough? Are you satisfied with what you have been doing? Or is there anything else that you would like to achieve or learn?
  - Who do you see most often now? Do you try to make more friends?
2. Did you go to work in the past? What did you do? Do you like the time when you were working and raising your children or your life now?
3. Do you feel happy now? How do you feel about being old? Do you feel old at all?  
Do you think old people are wiser than young people?
4. What is most important to you now?
5. Do you feel happier now or in the past when you had a job, or, say, twenty or thirty years ago? When was the happiest time in your life? What has happened? What makes you feel happy at that time?
6. What do you think can make an old person's life happy?
  - Are you living with your children and grandchildren? (If not) How often do you meet them? Do you wish they would visit you more often (if applicable)? Do they respect you? Do you take care of your grandchildren?
  - Do you need to worry about money? Do your children give you enough money to spend? Or do you think that it's their duty to give you money?
7. Is your spouse still alive?
  - (If not) How has your life changed after he/she was gone?
  - (If so) Do you worry about having to live alone when he/she passes away? Have you ever thought about that?
8. Do you think about your future? Do you have any expectations? How long do you want to live? Do you think that longevity is a good thing? What do you think will happen to you after you die? Have you ever thought about death? Are you afraid of death?
9. What do you think about young people's attitudes towards old people nowadays? Do you think young people have less respect on old people now? What was it like in the past? Do you think the government should promote respect for the elderly among the younger generations? What do think about the society as a whole now?



10. What do you think the government should do for old people? Should the government give them more financial assistance? For example, should it provide more activities and places for them to meet?

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